

An Investigation of the Middling Sort of Bridgnorth in the  
Later Middle Ages

By

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## **ABBREVIATIONS**

<i>BIHR</i>	British Institute of Historical Research
<i>CCR</i>	Calendar of Close Rolls
<i>CIPM</i>	Calendar of Inquisitions Post Mortem
<i>CRP</i>	Calendar of the Patent Rolls
<i>EHR</i>	English Historical Review
<i>EcHR</i>	Economic History Review
<i>JMH</i>	Journal of Medieval History
<i>SA</i>	Shropshire Archives
<i>TSANH</i>	Transactions of the Shropshire Archaeological and Natural History Society
<i>V.C.H. Salop</i>	The Victoria County History of the County of Shropshire
<i>T.N.A</i>	The National Archives
<i>LLGC/NLW</i>	The National Library of Wales

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## INTRODUCTION

The formation of towns and the different social groups who lived there has been an important field of study over the last sixty years and has illuminated many social groups who have previously only merited passing comment. One of these groups is the “middling sort”, which emerged in the fourteenth century. This group were the most prosperous towns’ people who gained wealth through wholesale trade and who held property in their town. Within this study they are defined by their property activities, civic duties and personal networks all of which were a key source of social and economic power. The status, power and identity of this group are examined within their locality of Bridgnorth which helped to mould their identity as they emerged through the fourteenth century alongside the growth of their town.

The location of Bridgnorth was settled on as an appropriate location of study as an initial survey of the archival evidence offered a broad enough base to determine who Bridgnorth’s middling sort were. The accessibility of archival sources for Bridgnorth are complimented with the remaining physical landscape of the town which still bears the original streets and layout established in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries.

Bridgnorth allows for an investigation into the individual identities of the middling sort as well as their actions as a collective, away from the influence of larger towns and cities used for similar studies such as those of Chester and Coventry.<sup>1</sup> Bridgnorth also offers an opportunity to study a flourishing rural town, which survived the plague years and did not appear to suffer dire losses and continued to prosper through the actions of this enterprising group. The size of Bridgnorth allows this study to follow the main middling sort families through the fourteenth century and watch the evolution of their social status. This progressing social status was performed through public displays of identity as well as gauging the values they held on status and sense of place as a collective of Bridgnorth. Bridgnorth has also been chosen, as unlike towns used in similar studies, it was never a manor. Therefore, Bridgnorth always maintained an element of individual identity which towns’ derived from manors can sometimes lose.

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<sup>1</sup> Derek Keene, *Survey of Medieval Winchester* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986); Richard Goddard, *Lordship and Medieval Urbanisation: Coventry 1043-1355* (Suffolk: Boydell Press, 2004).

Margaret Yates noted in her study of western Berkshire, that there has been a tendency for studies to focus on better documented sites, leaving few studies of middle-sized towns and those on the forefront of expansion from the cloth and wool trade, such as Bridgnorth.<sup>2</sup> Furthermore, Lindsay Charles, in her 'Introduction' to *Women and Work in Pre-Industrial England*, emphasised the need for work at a local level, suggesting that studies focusing on a narrow geographical boundary often present opportunities for comprehensive analysis, a method which is utilised for Bridgnorth.<sup>3</sup> The area of local studies as a whole has been greatly influenced by the works of W. G. Hoskins, who contributed to the study of landscape history and its effect on human activity.<sup>4</sup>

For the reasons above, Bridgnorth is an ideal location in which to study the middling sort and determine the criteria for inclusion in that social group. Social dynamics were shifting in the fourteenth century, which translated to members of this burgeoning middling sort, although they were not of gentry status, they held wealth comparable to that of the lower gentry and also contributed to local government, which had thus far been dominated by the gentry.

While there is a growing body of work dedicated to this significant group from the sixteenth century onwards, as discussed further below, studies focusing solely on them in earlier centuries remain lacking. The pre-sixteenth-century middling sort, like their well-studied successors, became the main contributors to the growing property market, trade networks and commerce within their town. The manner in which this group emerged in fourteenth-century localities has been neglected in research. Thus, the complex criteria for determining and defining this group, a criterion which meant

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<sup>2</sup> Margaret Yates, *Town and Countryside in Western Berkshire c. 1327 - c. 1600: Social and Economic Change* (Woodbridge: The Boydell Press, 2007), p. 69. Exceptions for the medieval period include R. H. Britnell, *Growth and Decline in Colchester, 1300-1525* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986); M. Kowaleski, *Local Markets and Regional Trade in Medieval Exeter* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995); C. M. Newman, *Late Medieval Northallerton: A Small Market Town and its Hinterland, c. 1470-1540* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999); J. Goodacre, *The Transformation of the Peasant Economy* (Aldershot: Routledge, 1994); J. Galloway, 'Town and Country in England, 1300-1570', in S. R. Epstein (ed.), *Town and Country in Europe, 1300-1800* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), pp. 106-31.

<sup>3</sup> Lindsey Charles, 'Introduction,' in Lindsay Charles and Lorna Duffin (eds.), *Women and Work in Pre-Industrial England* (London: Croom Helm, 1985), pp. 1-24.

<sup>4</sup> W. G. Hoskins, *The Making of the English Landscape* (London: Little Toller Books, 1955); *Local History in England*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed., (London: Longman, 1984).

that a person could belong to one social strata of the middling sort but hold interests with numerous other groups such as merchants, civic leaders and gentry, have thus far gone unacknowledged. It is only when investigating the middling sort that the complexity of how they overlapped with and touched upon the interests of the lower gentry becomes visible.

The result of this neglect in academic studies is a failure to develop a richer understanding of the changing model of a medieval society where historians often group the middling sort and peasantry *en masse* without acknowledging the nuances between them which the criteria of definition, as laid out in this study, hopes to achieve. While many studies identify certain groups within the middling sort, such as merchants, they have mostly focused on city locations.<sup>5</sup> Moreover, those who were not wholesale merchants but who were members of the middling sort have been overlooked. Aside from this limited focus on occupation, gender is also treated in isolation. Often, a study's focus lays either on evidence relating to men or that relating to women, treating them separately. In this study, I include evidence relating to both women and men equally.

This thesis identifies the role of the middling sort in the changing social sphere through an examination of their role in society and the social level they inhabited and how they chose to identify themselves and their changing status within their own community. Chapters 1 and 2 do this through examining the middling sorts behaviour while chapters 3, 4 and 5 focus on testamentary evidence and property, respectively, in order to further determine how the middling sort publicly placed themselves in the town through physical elements of burial place and property holdings.

This thesis develops the understanding of fourteenth-century society and specifically of the middling sort inhabiting it. It provides a local perspective by placing the middling sort in the context of their regional locality. By combining traditional methods of analysis, such as testamentary evidence and property deeds, with more novel ones, such as sigillography, and by complementing this with evidence from

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<sup>5</sup> J. Kermode, 'Sentiment and Survival: Family and Friends in Late Medieval English Towns', *Journal of Family History*, 24, no. 1 (January 1999), pp. 5-18; J. Kermode, 'The Merchants of Three Northern English Towns', in Cecil H. Clough (ed.), *Profession, Vocation and Culture in Later Medieval England* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 1982), pp. 7-38; Sylvia Thrupp, *The Merchant Class of London* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1948).

mapping and topographical studies, we can create a wider vision into the social relationships of the town's inhabitants and the identity they presented within their locality. Looking at the diverse nature of the middling sort, the current discussion identifies the connection between the nuances of office holding, wealth and property, social status and gender within a particular geographical context. This is conducted through examining the public identity these individuals chose to present of themselves within their community and the familiarity between individuals as their networks emerge which strengthened their business relations and in turn social position.

The remainder of this introduction explains the choice of source material used in this investigation more fully, including what the main body of deeds studied here comprises and how it is utilised to meet the aims of this study. Then, I discuss the extant work on the middling sort. Next, I elucidate my criteria for determining the middling sort in Bridgnorth and how this is presented in the main chapters of the thesis, before finally providing an overview of the rest of the thesis.

## **Source material**

A full discussion of who Bridgnorth's middling sort were follows, but first I discuss my methodology for identifying them and their actions in the context of the evidentiary basis. To identify the middling sort's role and their self-identification, this thesis assesses the deeds from the Pitchford Hall (Ottley) Papers collection at the National Library of Wales and the Shropshire Archives dating between 1280-1400, with additional material from the Calendar of Close Rolls and Exchequer records housed at the National Archives.<sup>6</sup> Bridgnorth was never a manor but was instead a royal peculiar and therefore no manorial records exist as there do for, for example, Coventry and Winchester.<sup>7</sup> With the lack of additional records, this thesis has utilised sigillography and the examination of seals to support and develop ideas of the middling sort's self-identity, not only for the personal seals of the middling sort but also, as previous

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<sup>6</sup> Aberystwyth, National Library of Wales (hereafter, LLGC/NLW), Pitchford Hall (Ottley) Papers; Shrewsbury, Shropshire Archives (hereafter, SA), Mrs Dyas' Collection; *Calendar of the Close Rolls, Preserved in the Public Record office: Edward III*, 14 vols (hereafter CCR) (London: Eyre and Spottiswoode, 1896-1913).

<sup>7</sup> W. T. MacCaffrey, *Exeter, 1540-1640: The Growth of an English County Town*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition (London: London University Press, 1975); Keene, *Medieval Winchester*; Peter Coss (ed.), *Early Records of Medieval Coventry* (London: H.M.S.O, 1986); Goddard, *Lordship and Medieval Urbanisation*.

research has informed us, the manner of their administration in a town and how those in charge of governance chose to display their role and status.<sup>8</sup> By utilising sigillography in the study of the deeds, the richness of the personal voice and actions of the middling sort becomes clear despite the lack of personal correspondence such as is extant for the fifteenth-century Paston family. In a careful reading of the testamentary evidence and seal motifs, elements of the perspective of the middling sort can be observed through the measures they employed to project their status publicly in the town.

The Pitchford Hall (Ottley) Papers and the additional material from the Shropshire Archives and the National Archives allow for a comprehensive study of the workings and the lives of Bridgnorth's middling sort, the changes to their environment and the urbanisation of their town and its environs through the study period of 1280-1400.

Mid-13 Century	Mid to last quarter of 13 century	1280-1290	1291-1300	1301-1310	1311-1320	1321-1330	1331-1340	1341-1350	1351-1360	1361-1370	1371-1380	1381-1390	1391-1400
20	20	33	81	50	51	65	62	121	81	41	26	26	28

Table 1 Number of deeds by decade<sup>9</sup>

There are 685 deeds in total and the volume of deeds for each decade of study is laid out in Table 1, demonstrating the influx in the mid decades of the fourteenth century. They mainly relate to property transfers, but include probate records, wills, letters of attorney, a grant to hold an annual fair and a jury list. The Pitchford Hall collection also includes a pedigree of the Baskerville family, a knightly family, who appear in records from the late thirteenth century and sporadically throughout the fourteenth century.<sup>10</sup> The deeds, of course, mainly relate to the manner in which property was bought, sold and leased over time. Through examinations of the deeds, it is suggested in what follows that the changing ideas and outlooks of the leading

<sup>8</sup> Elizabeth New, 'The Common Seal and Communal Civic Identity in Medieval London', in Susan Solway (ed.), *Medieval Coins and Seals: Constructing Identity, Signifying Power* (Turnhout: Brepols, 2015), pp. 297-318.

<sup>9</sup> LLGC/NLW, Pitchford Hall (Ottley) Papers; SA, Mrs Dyas' Collection; CCR.

<sup>10</sup> LLGC/NLW, Pitchford Hall (Ottley) Papers, deed 991, Jury List; deed 1383, Baskerville Pedigree; SA, Mrs Dyas' Collection, deed 4597/2, grant for an annual fayre. The Baskerville pedigree and the jury list are discussed further in Chapter 1.

families in the town can be perceived and Bridgnorth's middling sort can be identified. The deeds have provided a wider perspective than I had originally supposed as they also offer insight into the planning and development of Bridgnorth and its environs.

In Table 1 above I have included the deeds from the mid- to late-thirteenth century in order to demonstrate fluctuations leading up to the beginning of the study period, 1280, and place them in context. It is worth noting here that the fall in the number of deeds by the close of the fourteenth century was not necessarily due to a fall in the population of Bridgnorth, nor that the people who would have had deeds created were exclusively from gentry families of the earlier decades, nor that the rise in the written document had yet to take hold. It merely means that the collection is less robust during the latter decades. That said, the number of deeds in the collection does decrease, which results in a similar number as seen in the area over a century earlier. The boom period, as the mid-fourteenth-century collection is referred to further on in this study, relates to the increase in deeds where buying and selling of property is especially evident in the surviving deeds. The most common types of deeds are the grants, leases and releases of property as seen in Figure 1 and Figure 2 below.



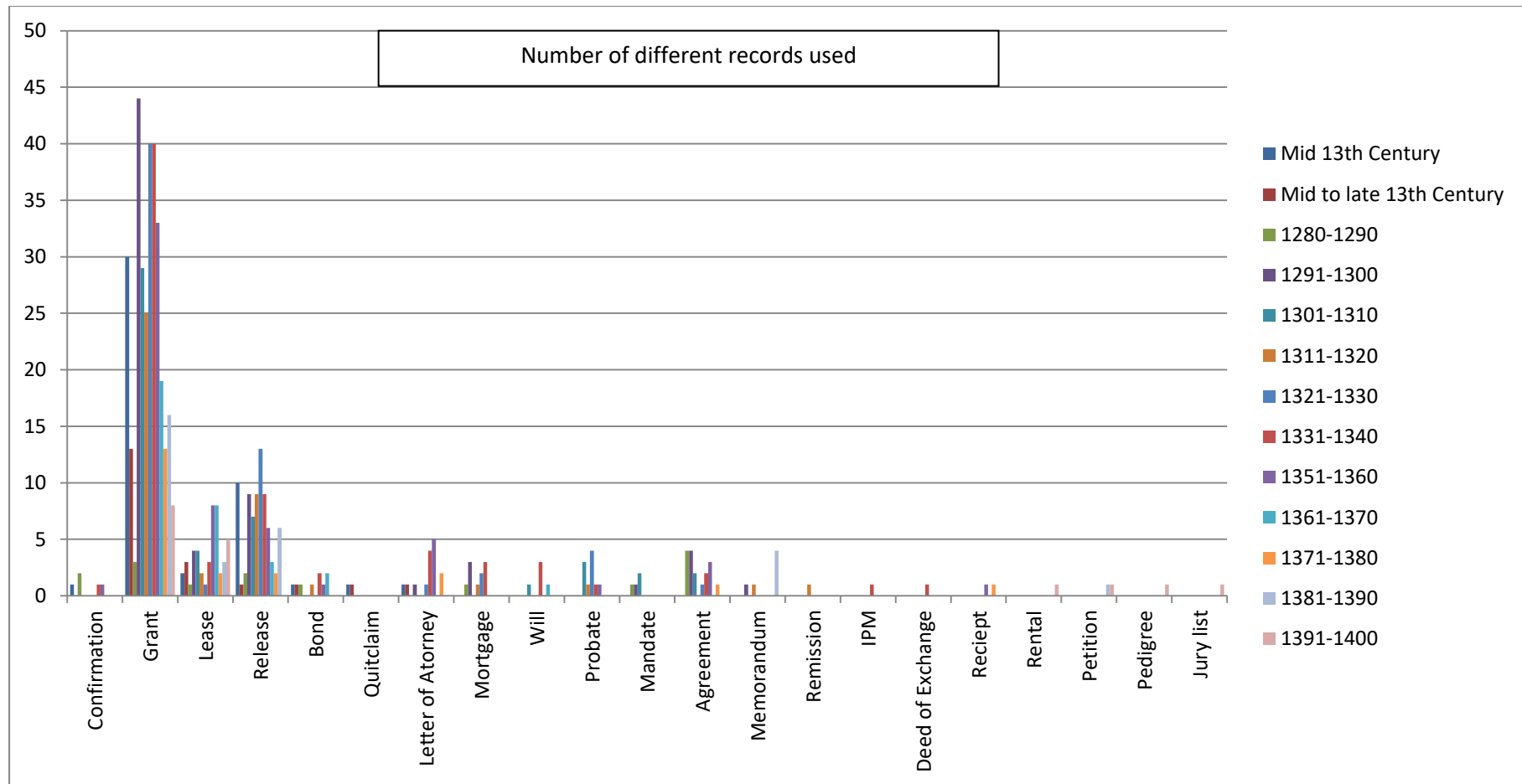


Figure 1 Type of records from the mid-thirteenth century to 1400<sup>11</sup>

<sup>11</sup> LLGC/NLW, Pitchford Hall (Ottley) Papers; SA, Mrs Dyas' Collection. The majority of records are grants, leases and releases of property.

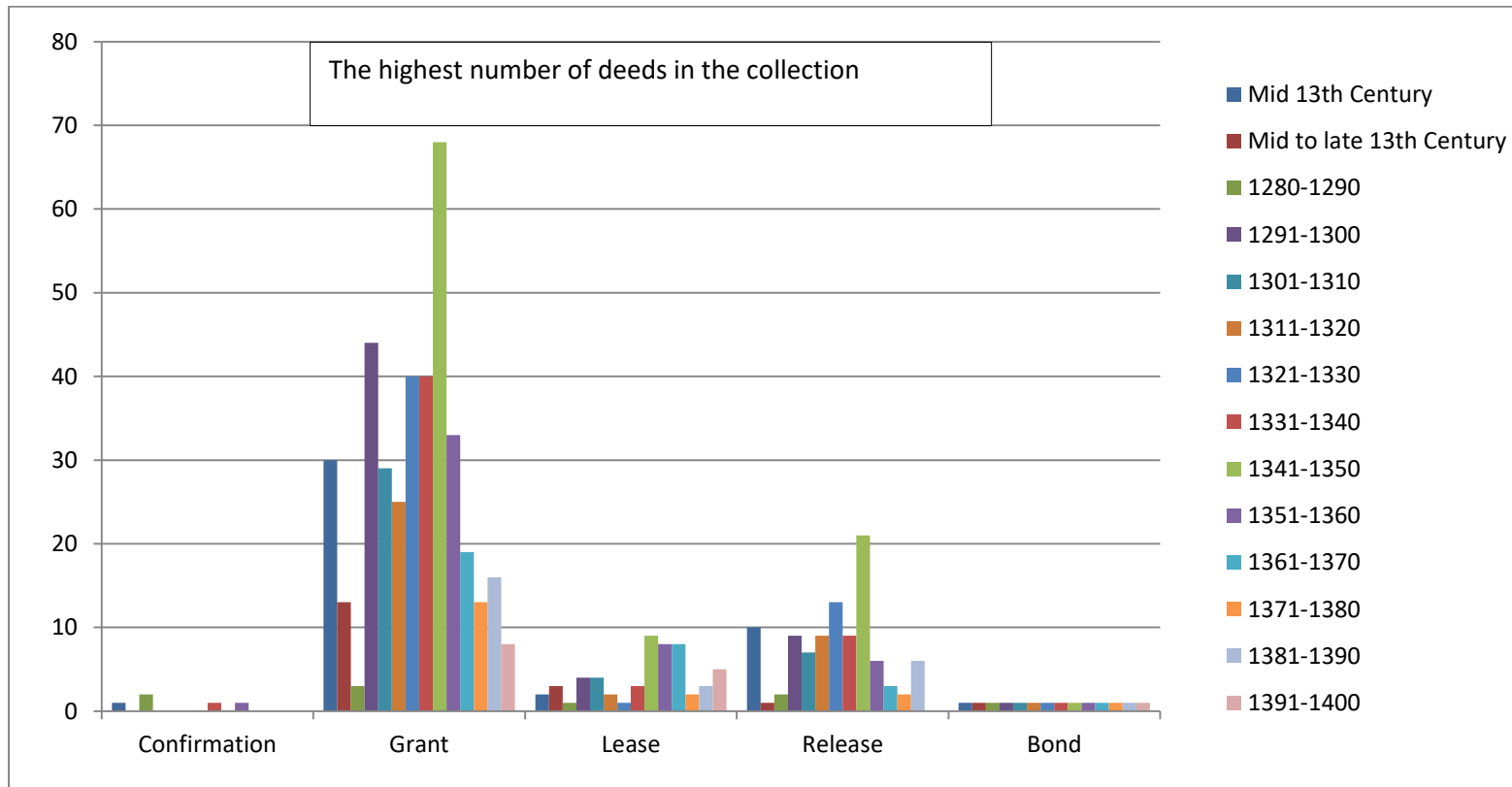


Figure 2 Most common type of records from the mid-thirteenth century to 1400<sup>12</sup>

<sup>12</sup> LLGC/NLW, Pitchford Hall (Ottley) Papers; SA, Mrs Dyas' Collection. The majority of records are grants, leases and releases of property.

The rise in deeds can be associated with the growth of the property market, discussed below, as record keeping became an official routine. Despite the fall in the number of deeds in the later decades, it is during this phase that we see more types of deeds being created aside from grants and leases. In the latter part of the fourteenth century, the sophistication of the written deed becomes apparent, as the town's people began to record other areas of their lives and civic roles.<sup>13</sup> An example of this from the last decade of study, 1390, is the pedigree of the Baskerville family.<sup>14</sup> This pedigree suggests that the gentry wished to emphasise their importance through recording it amid the rise of the middling sort, who challenged them and their prosperity in the town.<sup>15</sup> The sophistication of deeds also permitted a widening range of contractual agreements and flexible relationships, which can go some way in determining the changes in how power was exercised in the town from the thirteenth century through to the fifteenth.

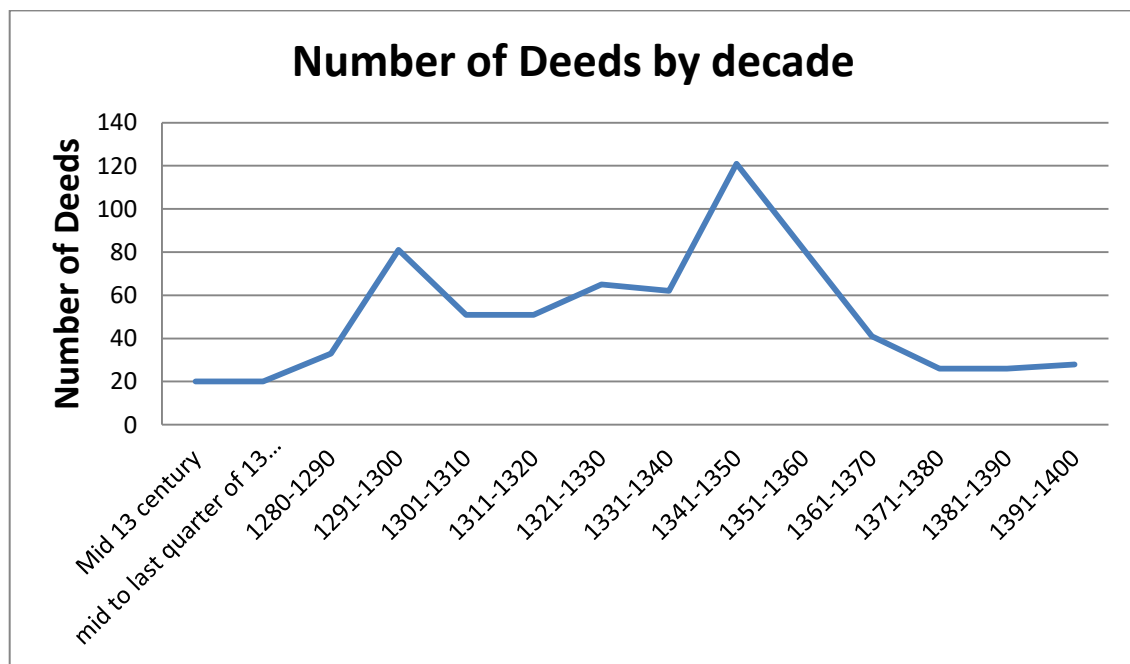


Figure 3 Number of deeds by decade<sup>16</sup>

The declining number of deeds in the later years of this study could be a characteristic of this particular collection or mean that later deeds have not survived. However, the true survival rate of this collection cannot be accurately calculated, as

<sup>13</sup> LLGC/NLW, Pitchford Hall (Ottley) Papers, deed 991, jury list.

<sup>14</sup> LLGC/NLW, Pitchford Hall (Ottley) Papers, deed 1383, Baskerville Pedigree; deed 991, jury list.

<sup>15</sup> LLGC/NLW, Pitchford Hall (Ottley) Papers, deed 1383, Baskerville Pedigree; deed 991, jury list.

<sup>16</sup> LLGC/NLW, Pitchford Hall (Ottley) Papers; SA, Mrs Dyas' Collection.

the original total or the frequency with which the deeds were produced through the period is unknown. The Pitchford Hall and Mrs Dyas' collection, from Shropshire Archives, are the main collections studied and have been chosen for this study as they offer rich accessible source material where the main body of deeds are held in a single archive. The main collection studied in this thesis is the Pitchford Hall collection which was gifted to the NLW in 1932 by C. J. C. Grant of Pitchford Hall and comprises the papers of Adam Ottley, bishop of St Davids, 1712-1723, and his cousin, another Adam Ottley, registrar of the diocese of St Davids, 1723-1752. The collection itself dates from 1150-1500 and the physical deeds are in good condition and readable, with only some fading due to the passing of time.

One of the features of viewing how the middling sort identified themselves is through their seals and here the limitations of this study can be traced to the physical deeds themselves. The main casualties of the deeds used are the seals, of which there are a number missing, fragmented or eroded over time. Other damage which has hindered the progress of some avenues of enquire took place during the study period as evidence from the physical deeds indicates. The tag to which the seal of a deed dated 1349 is attached highlights the value of vellum, as this tag has been reused from another deed. The reused deed appears to be a grant from Richard Robert, who appears frequently in witness lists between 1330-1350, to his son, for a property formerly held by the donor's brother, Ralph, and was written in the same style hand as the deed the tag is attached to.<sup>17</sup> Due to such practices, it has been difficult to follow the transactions of any one property throughout this collection. However, it has not prevented the actions of individuals or location and frequency of property transfers to be determined, which reveals another practice of the period and the people of Bridgnorth. Despite this, the deeds appear to have survived well and provide a body of material suitable for this investigation.

## **Methodology**

The criteria for defining a middling sort works best when practically applied using the evidentiary basis, which is what is attempted here for the middling sort of Bridgnorth. In order for the criteria, which are tested against the collections of deeds described

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<sup>17</sup> SA, Mrs Dyas' Collection, deed 796/7. Seal tag has been recycled.

above, to prove successful, they must interlink individuals to verify their status and actively represent their social relationships and participation in public life. Wealth and property played an important role in the definition of the middling sort, but these alone, can be isolating and not exclusively the preserve of the middling sort. Due to this this study's methodology focuses on three main criteria for this study's middling sort which are property holding, appearance as witnesses to deeds and the expanse of a person's networks. The assumption for the latter is that the more contacts a person had, the stronger their position in Bridgnorth's society. While using these three criteria I also acknowledge the importance to the middling sort status when acting as a bailiff and executing a will, as these are elected positions or chosen by others. These elected positions offer a further insight into status according to their peers which also provides an indication of the individuals with whom they interacted in a formal context.

The considerations discussed above have been used to determine who is a member of Bridgnorth's middling sort and for this the following method has been applied. For the persons to be referred to, either collectively or individually, as Bridgnorth's middling sort, they must meet the criteria mentioned above. First, the person must have witnessed deeds, as this demonstrated their standing as a trustworthy individual whose 'witness' could be relied upon and added gravitas to a transaction. The people in this study have all witnessed twelve or more deeds in the surviving documents. After meeting this criterion, the individuals must have acted as an active party in the deeds, again in twelve or more transactions. This not only demonstrates their networks and wealth, but the more active they were in the deeds, the more engaged they would have been in their community. Third, the networks of the middling sort, as identified here, must have consisted of twelve or more people who in turn also met the criteria described here. These networks emphasise and enforce the idea of collectives within the town and the partnerships which strengthened the middling sort. The final criterion, as discussed in Chapter 4, is property. All identifiable members of Bridgnorth's middling sort actively engaged in the property market and held numerous tenements and properties throughout the town. They bought or sold at least ten separate properties in the deeds.

The benchmark of ten or twelve for the criteria of the middling sort has been reached by employing the methodology which reflects the medium number of times for each criterion. These results have shown ten/twelve as the medium figure which, for each criterion, peaks in the middle decades of the fourteenth century. This reflects the evidence gathered in this thesis relating to property, civic duties and networks, as described further in Chapters 1, 2 and 4. With this benchmark set we continue to address the identity of Bridgnorth's middling sort with the assurance that those members of the middling sort of Bridgnorth discussed in this study meet all four criteria in order to be classified as such. The deeds studied suggest that the number of individuals meeting the specifications above would have ranged between twenty and twenty-five men and their families throughout the study period.

It is worth noting here that female members of the middling sort are included in this study, although they do not meet the criteria set out above, since their gender prevented them from carrying out official roles. Therefore, they have been considered as members of Bridgnorth's middling sort as they were the daughters, wives or widows of those who did meet the criteria. As women are often identified through their nearest male kin, it is accepted that they held that status which is presented through the thesis from their marriages and seals. Women do however meet the property criterion, although not to the extent as men.

### **Historians and the middling sort**

The term "middling sort" was made famous by Keith Wrightson and historians have preferred this term over the potentially more contentious term "middle class", a term which could include farmers of the demesne alongside merchants and professionals<sup>18</sup>. In Wrightson's work, we can begin to trace the origins of this terminology and apply it

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<sup>18</sup> The *Middle English Dictionary* suggests: "'mesurable', 'mesurabilis' for 'middling', although here it would seem to imply a person's discreet conduct, speech, or spending, sufficiency of wages; moderate in clothing; moderate of words, moderate of actions, not excessive; temperate; modest. The term is, in one sense, familiar to a modern reader, although it is likely 'moderate' would be used rather than 'middling'. This reference would place a person in a behavioural, rather than status, framework, referring to their 'moderate' characteristics". Robert E. Lewis, et al. (eds.), *Middle English Dictionary* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1952-2001), online edition in Frances McSparran, et al. (eds.), *Middle English Compendium* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Library, 2000-2018), <http://quod.lib.umich.edu/m/middle-english-dictionary/>, (accessed 12/09/2019); K. Wrightson, 'The Social Order of Early Modern England: Three Approaches', in L. Bonfield, R. M. Smith, and K. Wrightson (eds.), *The World we Have Gained* (Oxford: Oxford University press, 1986), pp. 177-192.

to this study. When describing the subjects of this study as middling sort it is difficult to find any contemporary literature which describes the middling sort as such. The use of the word 'sort' when defining a group of people is contemporary terminology, however, Wrightson notes its early usage in a variety of English vernacular works from at least the fourteenth century.<sup>19</sup> He identifies the widespread use of the term as a social description in the sixteenth century. For the later periods of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries historians offer many examples and definitions as to what made a person 'middling'. These definitions can be applied to the lifestyle, activities, wealth and status given to the collective of people defined here as being middling sort in fourteenth century Bridgnorth.

Historians have used numerous definitions to determine if a person was middling. As a group, the middling sort originally appeared to have no one common identifying factor. On closer study, the various definitions overlap and interconnect, revealing a group that possessed differing levels of wealth, but behaved in certain identifiable ways such as all holding property within the town and taking an active role in witnessing deeds. They identified themselves in the same manner as each other and essentially adhered to the same criterion which is discussed below. In order to overcome the difficulty of identifying a group within a wide spectrum of society this study does not consider the middling sort as an isolated group within their locality. Instead I address their differing levels of wealth with those of social groups above and below them. This can then lead to the identification of how Bridgnorth's individuals, in turn, identified themselves in comparison to the status groups above and below them. This approach can also go some way to raise questions of how far the middling sort recognised themselves as a group.

The concept of class and order can be said to have become a burden to historians, as it has tended to impose a somewhat constraining theoretical paradigm on the exploration of social relations. Some historians have approached this by drawing upon theoretical infrastructures of Marxism, but such approaches risk

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<sup>19</sup> Wrightson, 'The Social Order', pp. 177-202; *Lexico* s.v. 'sort', <https://www.lexico.com/en/definition/sort> (accessed 3/10/2019).

ignoring or marginalising areas of social status such as gender and race.<sup>20</sup> In reflecting upon this, Margaret Hunt has observed that 'class in the orthodox Marxian sense... may be obsolete, but many of the historical questions that have traditionally surrounded it are not.'<sup>21</sup> This has resulted in many historians refocusing on class-related issues and considering the middling sort as an idea as well as an identifiable section of society that can be determined based on the different social activities it engages in. The phrase "middling sort" has been adopted as a convenient and historically subtle description which avoids the numerous conceptual constraints of the term "middle class".<sup>22</sup>

Leonore Davidoff and Catherine Hall have used thematic approaches to demonstrate how the middle class identified themselves, noting the experiences of men and women, which centred around gendered material and the ideological separation of private and public spheres.<sup>23</sup> Such thematic approaches have made historians uncertain when identifying the middle class. Simon Gunn has noted that such a thematic approach can ignore the diffuse nature of the very fluidity of the middle class identity.<sup>24</sup> These problems with definition have caused historians to abandon the term "middle class" and instead employ a range of labels to either be more sensitive to the language of social depictions used by contemporaries or to bypass problems with identification and the theoretical language of class.<sup>25</sup> In the same vein, the phrase "middling sort" is adopted for this study, since it includes a range of people in a similar social position.

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<sup>20</sup> Patrick Joyce, *Visions of People; Industrial England and the Question of Class, 1848-1914* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991); N. Kirk (ed.), *Social Class and Marxism, Defences and Challenges* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996).

<sup>21</sup> Margaret Hunt, *The Middling Sort: Commerce, Gender and the Family in England, 1680-1780* (London: London University Press, 1996), p. 14.

<sup>22</sup> See Margaret Hunt, *The Middling Sort*, p. 14, where such labels are used in order to be sensitive to the particular historical context of her study (eighteenth century) and to address issues raised by the concept of class without needing to consider 'the fortunes of a group of French intellectuals over the last three decades' and the 'often abstruse debates' that have surrounded the theoretical demolition of class.

<sup>23</sup> Leonore Davidoff and Catherine Hall, *Family Fortunes: Men and Women of the English Middle Class, 1780-1850* (London: London University Press, 1987).

<sup>24</sup> Quoted in K. Boyd and R. Mc William, 'Conference Report: Historical Perspectives on Class and Culture', *Social History*, 20 (1995), pp. 82-106, p. 96.

<sup>25</sup> These themes are reviewed in G. Crossick, 'From Gentleman to Residuum: Languages of Social Description in Victorian Britain', in P. J. Corfield (ed.), *Language, History and Class* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1991), pp. 150-178; and G. Crossick, 'Metaphors of the Middle: The Discovery of the Petite Bourgeoisie, 1880-1914', *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, 6<sup>th</sup> series, 4, (1994), pp. 251-279.



Stephen Rigby's research and "closure theory" saw medieval English society in terms of its specific social categories of persons who by virtue of their roles shared a common endowment or lack of economic, coercive or ideological power. Rigby also studied the relations of social exclusion and social usurpation between them.<sup>26</sup> Murphy further analysed the process by which a group obtained a privileged position for itself through the creation of a group of inferiors and the attempts by the inferiors to obtain some of the privileges of their social superiors.<sup>27</sup> Here we can see elements of this structure as the economic success of Bridgnorth's rising middling sort brought them into contact with the lower gentry in terms of wealth. The middling sort then, in turn, emulated gentry and their practices.

As we will consider in what follows, the middling sorts emulation of the gentry can be seen to have led to a conflict between the groups as the gentry wished to remain apart from the middling sort. Rigby concluded that social conflict was 'crucial to determine social change', but this thesis only agrees with that to a certain extent.<sup>28</sup> The conflict described by Rigby could be seen to strengthen the group who merged into the middling sort against those who did not achieve this status through lack of wealth and property which can be identified in the landlord/tenant dynamic as seen through the middling sorts' property holdings.<sup>29</sup> What Rigby called conflict is essentially the differences between those who did and those who did not attain to the middling sort. This conflict was resolved through, for instance, practices in the market and property relations. Some elements of Rigby's closure theory could be applied to the changing social dynamics of fourteenth-century Bridgnorth, such as that members of any particular social group are often on 'hostile terms with each other as

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<sup>26</sup> Stephen Rigby, *English Society in the Later Middle Ages: Class, Status and Gender* (London: Macmillan, 1995).

<sup>27</sup> Raymond Murphy, 'The Concept of Class in Closure Theory: Learning from Rather than Falling into the Problems Encountered by Neo-Marxism', *Journal of Sociology*, 20, Issue 2, (1986), pp. 247-264; Rigby, *English Society*, p. 139; Stephen Rigby, 'Approaches to Pre-Industrial Social Structure', in Jeffrey Denton (ed.), *Orders and Hierarchies in Late Medieval and Renaissance Europe* (Palgrave, Basingstoke, 1999), p. 9. When looking at class structure and change, note Brenner's analysis of the procedures behind class relations and power in his discussion of the transition phase from feudalism to capitalism. Although local studies, such as this for Bridgnorth, do not consistently support his theory as a single model cannot be transported from one demographic to another. As developments of any one class structure in the localities as England must be viewed differently to the developments in France and Germany which Brenner refers. R. Brenner, 'The Agrarian Roots of Capitalism', *Past and Present*, 97 (1982), pp. 16-113.

<sup>28</sup> Rigby, *English Society*, p. 21.

<sup>29</sup> See Chapter 4 for further discussion on this.

competitors'.<sup>30</sup> This is certainly evident in terms of the town's property market and development in that they formed a 'class insofar as they had to carry a common battle against another class'.<sup>31</sup> Rigby's work is relevant to the current study not only because of the similarities to the argument put forward here on how Bridgnorth's middling sort can be defined, but also because Rigby's definition includes the role of women and the social disabilities they encountered due to their gender.<sup>32</sup> Rigby discussed women's property rights and their relationship to the means of production. He notes that aside from being divided by class, they also experienced social exclusion on non-class grounds based on their gender.<sup>33</sup>

Jonathon Barry has also contributed to the development of the study of the middling sort and lamented the lack of full-scale studies on this theme for the sixteenth century onwards.<sup>34</sup> Peter Earle also recognised the benefit of studying the middling section of society. Such studies reveal the significance and variability of the social structure and relationships within this group which occupied the social space between the landed elite and the poor.<sup>35</sup>

A compact definition of the middling sort which conveys many of the characteristics we see in fourteenth-century Bridgnorth is given by Shani d'Cruze on the independent trading households and heads of households, who are noted in this definition as not employed by others but instead gained income from property investment.<sup>36</sup> D'Cruze argued that income from trade and property ensured one's position in the middling sort and noted the occupations of the middling sort which could help define the central group and show the differences between bigger cities such as London and smaller towns and different agricultural regions.<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> Rigby, *English Society*, p. 17.

<sup>31</sup> Rigby, *English Society*, p. 17.

<sup>32</sup> Rigby, *English Society*, pp. 34-37.

<sup>33</sup> Discussed further in Chapter 4.

<sup>34</sup> Jonathon Barry and Christopher Brooks (eds.), *The Middling Sort of People: Culture, Society and Politics in England, 1550-1800* (Hampshire: MacMillan Press, 1994), p. 2.

<sup>35</sup> Peter Earle, *The Making of the English Middle Class: Business, Society and Family Life in London, 1660-1730* (London: London University Press, 1989).

<sup>36</sup> Shani d'Cruze, 'The Middling Sort in Eighteenth Century Colchester: Independence, Social Relations and the Community Broker', in Jonathon Barry and Christopher Brooks (eds.), *The Middling Sort of People: Culture, Society and Politics in England, 1550-1800* (Hampshire: MacMillan, 1994), pp. 181-208.

<sup>37</sup> d'Cruze, 'The Middling Sort'.

The group of people under analysis would not have referred to themselves as a “class” or a “sort” in the modern definitions. The first examples of a form of self-identification amongst these people is noted by Wrightson, as noted above, and Penelope Corfield.<sup>38</sup> Wrightson notes the language that contemporaries employed when identifying “sorts” or groups of people in their society and Corfield shows how the term “class” was slowly entering the language of the seventeenth century and was regularly used by the 1750s. With relevance to this study, R. S. Neale considered issues of gender and family in the middling sort, which prompted historians to carry out further social analysis on gender, age and position in the life cycle, alongside ideas of class founded in birth, occupation and wealth.<sup>39</sup> The current thesis considers the place of women in the middling sort, in particular the stages of their life cycles that can see them ebb and flow in their status within the middling sort.

Discussion of a person’s life cycle develops ideas of how women presented their identity through different stages of their life and their personal experience of life in a market town and the opportunities available to them and how they used them. The inclusion of women in studies of the middling sort and female involvement in the local economy by those of different social groups, has been studied by Matthew Stevens. Stevens worked on ethnicity in Welsh towns through case studies of social interaction in the town of Ruthin, using borough court records from between 1282-1348.<sup>40</sup> Stevens’ main focus lies on the urban assimilation of the Welsh and English in this border town, but his study develops our awareness of social elites, status and dominance. Importantly, he also includes women’s experiences and their contributions to the town’s economy. Stevens’ study highlights points of women’s experience that are also reflected in this study and the middling sort elite as a whole group.<sup>41</sup> By developing our understanding of the experience of women and categorising the middling sort, we gain an understanding of the composition of this group against wider questions of status and gender.

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<sup>38</sup> Wrightson, ‘The Social Order’; K. Wrightson, ‘Estates, Degrees and Sorts’, in P. J. Corfield (ed.), *Language, History and Class* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), pp. 29-51; P. J. Corfield, ‘Class by Name and Number in Eighteenth Century Britain’, *Social History*, 72 (1987), pp. 36-61.

<sup>39</sup> R. S. Neale, *Class in English History 1580-1850* (Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1981).

<sup>40</sup> Matthew Frank Stevens, *Urban Assimilation in Post-Conquest Wales: Ethnicity, Gender and Economy in Ruthin, 1282-1348* (Wiltshire: Cardiff University Press, 2010).

<sup>41</sup> Stevens, *Urban Assimilation*.

By incorporating a study of middling sort women, who have been largely overlooked, we can examine contemporary society's view of gender and the extent to which these views were mediated through social level and class. It assesses whether status was more or less important than gender within the middling sort. This thesis aims to look at the position of Bridgnorth's women and ask to what extent they were dominated by men and whether they played an important role alongside them and were in some sense equal partners.

Despite the foray into women's experiences they are placed within the study of the middling sort as one group. Despite Wrightson and Corfield's efforts to discuss the language used by the middling sort to describe themselves, it should be noted that applying terminology from one period to another is fraught, as Jack Hexter noted. He attacked, for example, 'the myth of the Tudor middle class' and questioned the appropriateness of applying the language of class from one society, which did use the terminology, to another, which did not.<sup>42</sup> He urged that terms be confined to groups such as merchants and traders.<sup>43</sup> Hexter's study is relevant to the current investigation as he argues that the middle ground of Tudor society was inhabited by those who were chiefly characterised as wishing to emulate the culture and values of the landed elite.<sup>44</sup> That is also a recurring theme in this study of Bridgnorth's middling sort, as is Hexter's attention to the fact that social mobility of the middling sort was a multi-generational affair. The idea that success for the middling sort was to achieve the rentier lifestyle of the landed gentry, the use of economic transactions and the purchase of land could be interpreted as the middling sort's commitment to the values of the landed elite.<sup>45</sup>

### **Identifying Bridgnorth's middling sort**

One noted problem when defining the middling sort is that they were economically more fragmented than either the poor or landed elite, but were nevertheless clearly distinguishable from their social inferiors by their economic level and their status as

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<sup>42</sup> J. H. Hexter, 'The Myth of the Middle Class in Tudor England', *Explorations in Entrepreneurial History* 2 (1950), p. 73 (revised in his 'Reappraisals in History', *Journal of Economics History*, vol 22, (1962), pp.404-405.

<sup>43</sup> Hexter, 'The Myth of the Middle Class', pp. 71-121.

<sup>44</sup> Hexter, 'The Myth of the Middle Class', pp. 71-121.

<sup>45</sup> Hexter, 'The Myth of the Middle Class'.

chief inhabitants within their local society. The middling sort spanned from the peasant elite who met the gentry in terms of wealth, to traders who kept their business town based, covering a wide section of society. This could result in tensions between, for example, traders and rentier landlords, but the complexity of interests between the middling sort provides them a certain cohesion, which cannot be seen in the poor or the landed elite. Examples of this cohesion can be found in the horizontal ties between merchants and the artisans who retailed their own goods. As Jonathon Barry notes, these ties emphasised the degree of urban association or at least cohesion within a diverse society. Ultimately, both groups were selling a product.

Without further definition, the middling sort could be seen to encompass all those in the town and as such preclude its usefulness. Indeed it is with reference to Rigby's closure theory, noted above, and the idea of infinite social gradation that the inclusion, or not, within a certain group or collective is to be discussed.<sup>46</sup> The following discussion specifically relates to Bridgnorth and those identified as belonging to its middling sort and how they became part of this group. It is also to be noted at this point that despite the development of Bridgnorth in the fourteenth century with the slow decline in names associated with agrarian occupations it could not be considered an urban centre. Bridgnorth's middling sort should be considered a rural middling sort rather than an urban middling sort, the latter being better associated with cities such as London or York. Here, I describe the middling sort of this investigation, specific to Bridgnorth, and how they appeared in the deeds and developed into an identifiable group in the middle decades of the fourteenth century.

The economic, cultural and political activities of the middling sort provide the elements of social differentiation between them, the gentry and the peasants. However, members of the middling sort would have also belonged to various other social groups based on their age, occupation and civic activities and for this reason we need to establish a working criteria to define them. A problem occurs when indicators of occupation, wealth, birth, lifestyle and political sway are used to define a group, as they can only be firmly seen at the top and bottom levels of society. This produces grey areas where the middling sort, as merchants and professional men, might meet

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<sup>46</sup> Rigby, *English Society*.

some criteria of the lower gentry but could not claim gentle status due to their occupation, birth and lifestyle. The middling sort can be described through three main areas culture, economy, and political activities which are now identified below.

Economically, although the middling sort rivalled the lower gentry in terms of wealth, they were separated from them by the need to trade and earn their income. The middling sort ultimately engaged in commerce and became consumers themselves in a competitive market. They lived in an uncomfortable dependency, which reflects Rigby's point that social conflict was 'crucial to determine social change' within their middling group as they marketed and sold their products as rivals.<sup>47</sup> Despite the differences and tensions which may have occurred in this group their common identity as Bridgnorth's middling sort did create a form of reluctant alliance within them. Bridgnorth's middling sort is closely associated with the developments in commercialisation of fourteenth-century Bridgnorth, as discussed in the work of Richard Britnell. Britnell explained that commercialisation is relevant to the development of the locational and specialist occupations which helped transform the growth of production and the economy.<sup>48</sup> It is from this growth that associations of power and property began to occur in the middling sort as they built their personal networks, here we see the wealthier middling sort meet the lower gentry most closely. It is this group of wealthy Bridgnorth inhabitants who form the middling sort and are those identified in this study. This group consisted of merchants and traders with access to large amounts of capital and who sought recognition from the gentry. Throughout this study the growing wealth of the middling sort has become ever more obvious however, it has not been included as one of the main criteria for this study's definition of Bridgnorth's middling sort. While there is no denying the fact that wealth brought social status, the members of the middling sort did not all hold wealth that met with that of the gentry. They did however, all display the same characteristics of emulating the gentry and it is this form of identity with gentry practices which marks

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<sup>47</sup> Rigby, *English Society*, p. 21.

<sup>48</sup> R. Britnell, *The Commercialisation of English Society, 1000-1500* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1996); 'The Proliferation of Markets in England, 1200-1349', *Economic History Review*, 2<sup>nd</sup> Series, 34 (May, 1981), pp. 209-21.

out the middling sort. Wealth has also been rejected as a defining criterion as it has been impossible to determine the exact finances of the middling sort as records which may have allowed such an investigation are, with certain exceptions such as lay subsidy returns discussed later in this thesis, not available. For these reasons, wealth is discussed and acknowledged as an important factor to the middling sort but has not been included in the criteria which is discussed and demonstrated below. However, the middling sort of this study is defined in the criteria presented here as being a group of wealthy elites in their town.

The middling sort's quest for recognition can be seen in their cultural assumptions. Historians of later centuries have concluded that the middling culture was essentially an imitation in a subordinate fashion of the civic and religious practices of the elite.<sup>49</sup> This is discussed further in Chapter 3 when identifying the characteristics of the middling sort as witnessed through their testamentary evidence. Despite such attempts to imitate the gentry, the consumer culture of the middling sort kept them at a distance from the gentry. The lower gentry, for their part, continued to develop their cultural habits in order to distance themselves from the wealthier middling sort who could imitate their civic or religious practices if not claim the same social status.

The upward mobility and aspirations of the middling sort can be seen to act in parallel to the individuals' life cycle. This is worth remembering when using static forms of evidence such as testamentary evidence and tax records to discuss the middling sort over a century. Essentially it means that if we use wealth as the main form of definition for the middling sort, then it would make sense that the middling sort would be inhabited by an older demographic. Age can relate to growth and those on the periphery of the middling sort in their twenties may well be firmly established by their forties. At this point, they may have inherited wealth from their merchant fathers, grown their own economic success, or even married into the lower gentry. The mature members of the middling sort would also have built up a network of

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<sup>49</sup> L. S. O'Connell, 'The Elizabethan Bourgeois Hero-Tale', in B. C. Malament (ed.), *After the Reformation* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1980), pp. 267-90; L. Stevenson, *Praise and Paradox: Merchants and Craftsmen in Elizabethan Popular Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984); J. Raven, *Judging New Wealth* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992); Hunt, *The Middling Sort*.

associations to support their political and civic ambitions in the town, positions which brought status, another criterion of the middling sort.

In this sense it could be said that a characteristic of the middling sort was their preoccupation with upward mobility – if not in the reality of their birth, then through their actions, most notable of which was the purchase of land. Land offered a secure foundation for upward mobility as it afforded one an estate. In the property actions of the middling sort we can see the introduction of a ‘pseudo-gentry’, as described by Jonathon Barry and other historians of Early Modern England.<sup>50</sup> The sigillographical evidence drawn on in this study also points to this ‘pseudo-gentry’ behaviour as the seal motifs chosen by residents of Bridgnorth had a clear pseudo-heraldic design. In the fourteenth century, tenurial ladders of rentiers and the purchase of urban estates saw property associations become marks of Bridgnorth’s middling sort.<sup>51</sup> The urban associations created through their property networks afforded them some economic privileges such as fairs and markets, which strengthened their networks and allowed them to manage, organise and, to a degree, control their environment. This in turn led to the creation of the written records which form the basis of the current study.

Political concerns of the middling sort saw the mercantile elite and those holding a profession often exercise their power through their membership of judicial or administrative systems, which became a central factor of their social status despite appearing exceedingly variable. This political power distinguished the elite middling sort from those below them in social status, as it placed them closer to the gentry in the hierarchy. This access to political power in their, the middling sorts’, locality isolated the poorer groups as participation noted notions of freedom which were commonly accessed through a higher social status.

The three areas, outlined above cultural, economic and political, operated to comprise the group who are the middling sort. The mercantile elite of the town,

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<sup>50</sup> Barry and Brooks (eds.), *Middling Sort*; A. Everitt, ‘Social Mobility in Early Modern England’, *Past and Present*, 33 (1966); P. Rogers, ‘Money, Land and Lineage’, in P. Clark (ed.), *Transformation of English Provincial Towns* (London: HarperCollins, 1984), pp. 133-68; A. Everitt, ‘Dynasty and Community since the Seventeenth Century’, in his *Landscape and Community in England* (Leicester: Leicester University Press, 1985), pp. 309-30; P. Clark and D. Souden (eds.), *Migration and Society in Early Modern England* (London: Hutchinson, 1987).

<sup>51</sup> This is discussed further in Chapter 4 and Appendix 1.



whose urban associations were reflected in their power and responsibility, concerned themselves with commercial trade and property. These mercantile elite connected with the lower gentry through marriage, as discussed in the case study of Edmund Pitchford and Alice Rondulph in Chapters 2 and 4, and could stretch to also include lesser merchants and shopkeepers who held property in the town. As Peter Earle notes, in the seventeenth century, the upper part of the middling sorts consisted of merchants and tradesmen, while some writers of the time expanded the definition to include wholesale men and shopkeepers. This definition can also be applied here. However, this definition ultimately considers merchants and tradesmen to be both higher socially and economically than those trading in handcrafts.<sup>52</sup>

The social functions of Bridgnorth society can thus be divided into three groups: the gentry with landed investment and no need to work; the middling sort, whose work and lives are dependent on the profits of capital and the employment of others; and those who are employed and work with their hands. To expand this further merchants worked but were not servile in conducting their business. They styled themselves on the gentry and held investments in urban property and loans to other tradesmen. It is this group that this study identifies as middling.

## **Thesis overview**

This introduction has illustrated how the middling sort are identified in this study. In Chapter 1, the criteria for identifying the characteristics of Bridgnorth's middling sort are discussed. The thesis then establishes what is meant by "middling" in this study and how the people of Bridgnorth fit within this criterion while identifying individuals through their community actions, networks and occupation. The thesis then assesses the issues of marriage and remarriage when maintaining this social status through changing life patterns. Once this identification of the middling sort has been established, this thesis then determines how they operated within the context of their location.

Chapter 2 considers how the middling sort identified themselves through an analysis of the way certain occupations can be seen as "middling" within their location

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<sup>52</sup> P. Earle, 'The Middling Sort in London', in J. Barry and C. Brooks (eds.), *The Middling Sort of People: Culture, Society and Politics in England, 1550-1800* (Hampshire: MacMillan Press, 1994), pp. 141-159.

of Bridgnorth. This brings the wealth of merchants into focus which is then addressed in the context of the local gentry, whom they rivalled in terms of wealth but not in heritage. The identification of heritage through a coat of arms is investigated through sigillographical evidence from both men and women in order to establish how they identified themselves publicly and demonstrated their status through the inclusion of pseudo-heraldic motifs which were incorporated onto their seals and the use of what could be described as a mock coat of arms. Here we are fortunate to be able to include the sigillographical evidence of women in a case study which demonstrates how women felt the need to display their status in much the same way as men. Here this investigation addresses whether the middling sort carved out their own identity in the fourteenth century or, as some of the evidence suggests, used their evolving status simply to imitate and emulate the gentry with whom they were now meeting in terms of wealth.

Chapter 3 focuses further on this characteristic of emulating gentry practices through the testamentary evidence of the middling sort. The chapter considers the funeral arrangements, of Bridgnorth residents, which reflect those of the gentry, and the patronage they bestowed on religious institutions. It discusses the middling sort's bequests to demonstrate the wealth they held through their bequests. This evidence offers case studies of individuals who may not have held enough wealth to found an entire building but could pay for chapels and chantries and request place of burial inside the church. It is also through the testamentary evidence of the middling sort that we see their main concern for their family and town reflected in their wealth and status in Bridgnorth. These social relations are revealed through gifting to friends and religious institutes and their provisions for family. Such gifts offer a dual view of the private concern of the middling sort for their family and the public image they would leave following their death. The provisions made by the testator support the evidence presented in Chapter 1, as the networks which evolved between members of this group in turn supported and advanced their position, as seen by who they included in their bequests. Throughout this chapter, and the thesis, the self-identification of this group and their own awareness of it is constantly addressed through the diplomatic

phrases of testamentary evidence concerning other members of their society such as the poor.

This testamentary evidence also reveals the relationships between members of the middling sort, who are identified in this introduction; the inclusion of a case study of women's bequests and a discussion about the choice of a will's executor also allows reflection upon the trust and equal partnerships between men and women of this status within their networks. An examination of a will's execution is included to draw the experience of women further into this investigation and focuses on their legal experience when carrying out this duty. The benefit of such an approach is that women are not considered in isolation, which develops our understanding of Bridgnorth's society and the middling sort by considering all its members.

Chapter 4 addresses a fundamental difference between the gentry and the wealthy middling sort elite, who are identified in the previous chapters. Despite members of the elite middling sort holding wealth to match with the lower gentry, they did not have a landed estate as the gentry did. This thesis addresses this issue where property demonstrated wealth and status, and here the middling sort focused their purchase of property in one area or street of the town over a period of time to essentially create their own "urban estate". In chapter 4 we examine the identity of the town which the middling sort inhabited and how Bridgnorth developed and became a market town where the middling sort could prosper. The chapter maps the physical changes of the town, which in turn reflect the changing social status of those living there as they invested in the development of a market place and shops. The middling sort also developed areas comparable to modern suburbs for their own residence while acting as landlords to those further down the social scale living in tenements. While previous studies have used wealth to suggest social stratification, the social consequences of this wealth have been left unaddressed. The accumulation of property can be seen as a defining characteristic of the middling sort. Fundamentally, property was a visible signifier of social difference, which is explored further here through tenurial ladders, using the landlord-tenant dynamic as a social signifier.

This was a method in which the middling sort used their property to make it socially significant and which allowed them to display social significance through the landlord/ tenant dynamic as well to show who could afford property and those who were tenants and resided in tenements. The importance of property to the middling sort as a collective, sharing ideas and values, was that it opened up opportunities for internal social relationships and networks, which is a key theme in this study. Earlier thematic studies of the middle classes have often overlooked the significance of property to the middling sort and have therefore tended to emphasise the cultural and political discourse over social and economic relationships.<sup>53</sup> As a result, they have neglected the economic base for the social identity of the middling sort, which is a theme of this thesis.

Once again, to offer a balanced view of Bridgnorth's middling sort, the property endeavours of men and women are investigated equally. Chapter 5 focuses on women's involvement in Bridgnorth's property market, both actively and passively. Actively, we see women grant and receive land, most commonly as widows when executing their husbands' will, but also in partnerships between husbands and wives of the middling sort when they act jointly in property transactions. Single women who were active in the property market are also examined. Although they are fewer than the men, but equally relate the social status of individuals in this group irrespective of gender. Finally, we turn to the passive role women played in the property market through their dower and dowries.<sup>54</sup>

## Conclusion

The aim of this study is to determine the identity of Bridgnorth's middling sort in a period of transitioning social status in the fourteenth-century town. By determining their identity and examining how we identify them and how they identified themselves through the evidence they have left behind, we can see the social practices that came to uphold and reaffirm their status as individuals and as a group within their locational context. By utilising all the sources available to us and using a

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<sup>53</sup> Davidoff and Hall, *Family Fortunes*.

<sup>54</sup> A dowry was the bride's contribution to the marriage and could include land, money, chattels, clothing and fine objects. A dower was the husband's contribution to the marriage and was contractually promised to come to the wife if she outlived him. See Christopher Corebon and Ann Williams (eds.), *A Dictionary of Medieval Words and Phrases* (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2013).

range of methods, the experience of the complex ways in which the middling sort portrayed their identity, rose to increase their prominence and importance and shaped the fabric of their environment can be explored.

## CHAPTER 1: IDENTIFYING BRIDGNORTH'S MIDDLE SORT

### Introduction

In this chapter, we discuss the community of the middling sort of Bridgnorth, thus focusing on the criteria presented in the introduction. The chapter first provides a description of the middling sort and what made a person middling. I examine the criteria laid out in the introduction for identifying Bridgnorth's middling sort; their appearance in witness lists, personal and business networks (occupations and civic duties), and how they consciously maintained their new status. In the latter context, the issue of marriage and remarriage is introduced, leading to a discussion of the experience of middling sort women. Alice Rondulph is used as a case study to illustrate this. Finally, remarriage of men is discussed before the chapter is concluded.

### What is meant by "middling"?

In this section, we take a preliminary look at definitions of the middling sort and assess similar studies of historians attempting to determine this group in their own context of the Middle Ages.<sup>1</sup> Jenny Kermode, Margaret Yates, Matthew Holford and Peter Coss, all highlight national trends and themes of the middling groups.<sup>2</sup> Mathew Stevens noted that 'status, like wealth, can only be measured indirectly and by a limited number of indices'.<sup>3</sup> Among these indicators, he included property accumulation, ecclesiastical vocation and office holding, all of which were characteristics of Bridgnorth's middling sort. The Individual case studies from Bridgnorth offer a closer relationship and understanding of the people in their developing environment. Richard Smith noted in his introduction to Eileen Power's *Medieval People* that historians 'do not readily use the vignette and the individual

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<sup>1</sup> A. Beat Kumin, *The Shaping of a Community: The Rise and Reformation of the English Parish, c. 1400-1560* (Aldershot: Scolar Press, 1996); James Masschaele, *Jury, State and Society in Medieval England* (Basingstoke: MacMillan, 2008), pp. 196-7; Matthew Holford, 'Thrifty Men of the County: The Jurors and Their Role', in Michael Hicks (ed.), *The fifteenth Century Inquisitions Post Mortem: A Companion* (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 2012), pp. 201-223; K. B. Post, 'Jurors and Jury Lists in the Late Fourteenth Century', in J. S. Cockburn and T. A. Green (eds.), *Twelve Good Men and True: The Criminal Trial Jury in England* (Guildford: Princeton University Press, 1988), pp. 65-77.

<sup>2</sup> Kermode, 'Sentiment and Survival', p. 13; Kermode, 'Merchants of Three Northern English Towns'; Holford, 'Thrifty Men of the County'; Peter Coss, *The Origins of the English Gentry* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), pp. 4, 10, 16; Lordship, *Knighthood and the Locality: A Study of English Society c. 1180 - c. 1280* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991).

<sup>3</sup> Stevens, *Urban Assimilation*, p. 60.

experience as a means of describing social structure'.<sup>4</sup> The difficulty with an individualised approach is that we risk losing sight of the wider social context of the individual, which is where the studies of Kermode, Holford and Coss's are used to offer a national perspective on the same area of study.

Historians have questioned the importance of the stratification of local societies in order to question the impact of hierarchies to local communities. Baker suggested that the accumulation of land by richer peasants in the post-plague period was one of the most important developments the English countryside saw in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries.<sup>5</sup> Rodney Hilton proposed that this period was likely to have been a 'golden age' for the middle classes rather than the richer peasantry.<sup>6</sup> And Barry and Brooks employed the household as a unit in order to identify the middling group of society.<sup>7</sup> They suggest that the middling sort occupied the important place between farmers with large holdings and the poor and were a key unit of reproduction and family life, essentially the heart of the economic production – be it farm or workshop.<sup>8</sup> Margaret Yates instead coined the term "modal group of taxpayers" who found preference for this composite form in her study of western Berkshire.<sup>9</sup> Essentially, she identified the middling sort through similarities of wealth and behaviour.

Matthew Holford has drawn upon records from central government such as tax returns, Parliamentary Rolls and Inquisitions Post-Mortem in an attempt to define a "middling sort".<sup>10</sup> Holford's analysis of jurors who attested to the findings of inquisitions reveals the interests of popular politics which were engaged upon by local men below the level of gentry.<sup>11</sup> Holford draws upon fifteenth-century records, and indeed by the fifteenth century he suggests describing jurors as "middling" or those

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<sup>4</sup> Eileen Power, *Medieval People*, 'Introduction' Richard Smith (ed.), (Oxford, 1924), p.26.

<sup>5</sup> A. Baker, 'Changes in the Later Middle Ages', in Michael Hicks (ed.), *The fifteenth Century Inquisitions Post Mortem: A Companion* (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 2012), pp. 102-124, p. 106.

<sup>6</sup> Rodney Hilton, *The English Peasantry in the Later Middle Ages: The Ford Lectures for 1973 and Related Studies* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975), p. 280.

<sup>7</sup> J. Barry and C. Brooks, 'Introduction', in J. Barry and C. Brooks (eds.), *The Middling Sort of People: Culture, Society and Politics in England, 1550-1800* (Hampshire, 1994), pp. 1-27.

<sup>8</sup> Barry and Brooks, 'Introduction'.

<sup>9</sup> Yates, *Town and Countryside*, p. 69.

<sup>10</sup> Holford, 'Thrifty Men'.

<sup>11</sup> Holford, 'Thrifty Men', p. 215.

who held a wide variety of professions and wealth, is better suited.<sup>12</sup> The “middling sort” in Holford’s analysis of jurors are presented as genuinely “local” men, who were expected to be knowledgeable to a degree about the lands under investigation. Holford suggested they were selected from ‘the more prosperous middling ranks of rural and urban society’.<sup>13</sup> This evidence suggests that the middling sort saw themselves as prosperous and entitled to perform such duties. Holford’s research shows that this group was fully formed and functioning within their society by the fifteenth century.

The idea of the “middling ranks” taking on duties within their town is shown in K. B. Post’s study of jury lists from the late fourteenth century. Jury lists from the study period show that they were made up of ‘the middle classes of society’ and ‘more prosperous middling ranks of rural and urban society’ according to Posts study.<sup>14</sup> The fact that members of the middling sort could be jurors suggests that they had some knowledge of the law. They also had to be landowners and possibly would have taken on further administrative and governmental duties within their town. Essentially, they were already evolving into a ‘middling group’. Post shows that jurors at gaol deliveries in the late fourteenth century were ‘from a broad band of the middle classes of society’.<sup>15</sup> He further noticed that ‘local men’ undertook this role as the gentry had previously done, but that, as the century progressed, lords of the area slowly ebbed from this duty as the capabilities, interests and understanding of the townsmen became sufficient for this job.<sup>16</sup> Holford observed, in his analysis of jurors, that while the individual burden upon these men was not onerous, the collective familiarity of the middling sort with the business of royal government should not be underestimated.<sup>17</sup> Yates’s study showed that in their function as jurors, they were usually tenants of half to two and a half virgate holdings.<sup>18</sup> Yates recognised that they were an essential and integral element to the success of the working society, as their

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<sup>12</sup> Holford, ‘Thrifty Men’.

<sup>13</sup> Holford, ‘Thrifty Men’, p. 214.

<sup>14</sup> Post, ‘Jurors and Jury Lists’, p. 68.

<sup>15</sup> Post, ‘Jurors and Jury Lists’.

<sup>16</sup> Post, ‘Jurors and Jury Lists’, p. 68.

<sup>17</sup> Holford, ‘Thrifty Men’, p. 214.

<sup>18</sup> Yates, *Town and Countryside*, p. 221.



collective impact meant they were driving and implementing change in their locality.<sup>19</sup> Her findings also demonstrate that the middling group in society comprised the majority of the tenant population who held the modal part of the town's distribution of wealth and landholdings.<sup>20</sup>

Holford saw the middling sort as occupying a broad spectrum, representing the nuances of social stratification which emerged in the later Middle Ages.<sup>21</sup> This is also clear in Bridgnorth, which had a wealthy sub-element where identification of a middling sort through office holding, relative wealth, social mobility and aspirations can be discerned. Christine Carpenter suggests that the differentiation of the lower gentry and the middling sorts in rural communities emphasises their particular interests.<sup>22</sup> Carpenter's hypothesis argues that the middling sort held interests largely confined to one location, whereas the gentry had interests in a wider community, perhaps including holding land in another county.<sup>23</sup> Within this middling sort, those who held administrative positions, and were wholesale merchants, although not gentry, did hold interests in the wider community.<sup>24</sup>

Peter Coss suggested that a person must meet certain criteria of a collective before they can be identified as belonging to a certain group. These criteria include shared ideals for their community, collective identity, property and holding of public office, alongside status gradations which appeared in the first half of the fourteenth century.<sup>25</sup> The gradations to which Coss refers reflect the spectrum of the middling sort – from the wealthy peasants to the lower gentry – which matches the criteria for this study, as laid out in the introduction. In any society, a collective strengthens ideas and opinions, especially when it is required to provide administration of justice within a society.<sup>26</sup> For instance, Bridgnorth was governed by two provosts. Several men who

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<sup>19</sup> Yates, *Town and Countryside*, p. 207.

<sup>20</sup> Yates, *Town and Countryside*, p. 207.

<sup>21</sup> Holford, 'Thrifty Men', p. 215.

<sup>22</sup> Christine Carpenter, 'Gentry and Communities in Medieval England: The Vill, Guild and Gentry: Forces of Community in Later Medieval England', *Journal of British Studies*, 33 (1994), pp. 340-380.

<sup>23</sup> Carpenter, 'Gentry and Communities', p. 354.

<sup>24</sup> Carpenter, 'Gentry and Communities', p. 354.

<sup>25</sup> Coss, *Origins of the English Gentry*, pp. 4, 10, 16; *Lordship, Knighthood and Locality*, p. 225.

<sup>26</sup> Coss, *Origins of the English Gentry*, pp. 10-11; *The Foundations of Gentry Life: The Multons of Frampton and their World, 1270-1370* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010); Chris Given-Wilson, *The*

held this position at some point and appeared in the 1337 lay subsidy and frequently in deeds from the Bridgnorth collection, whether as an active party or as a witness to a deed.<sup>27</sup> John Glidde was provost in 1318 and 1334, John Rondulph in 1313 and 1334, William Ashbourne in 1315, John Croke in 1324, Edmund le Palmer in 1323 (he was burgess of the Parliament in 1315), and Simon Dod in 1325.<sup>28</sup> The position of provost appeared to be held by members of the middling sort, who also held local civic roles, such as John Rondulph's son-in-law, Edmund Pitchford, who was provost in 1313 and 1334 and was also engaged as a commissioner of oyer and terminer.<sup>29</sup>

Such activity, best fits the community of Bridgnorth, as suggested in the model developed by Coss of a town which accommodated and incorporated wealthy townsmen, lower gentry and those who employed others and were heads of households<sup>30</sup> Coss emphasised a connection between status and municipal independence, as a means to operate the classification of social rank, leading to the creation of dominant townsmen – whether landowners, craftsmen or merchants.<sup>31</sup> Eleanora Carsus-Wilson argued that wealth was the defining element in social rank in urban elites and considered it superior to territory or land, suggesting that “rank” in the medieval city was determined by wealth.<sup>32</sup> Although wealth is not a defining criterion of this study it was important to the town's people and their place in Bridgnorth society. When these two factors, wealth and local government, are combined, it presents one degree by which the market town's middling sort judged their status but only if the individuals met with the criteria as discussed in the introduction. Where property was concerned, this is demonstrated in Bridgnorth as we witness individuals buying up “urban estates”, discussed in Chapter 4, while the value of the wealth they possessed is illustrated through their testamentary evidence

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*English Nobility in the Late Middle Ages: The Fourteenth Century Political Community* (London: Routledge, 1996).

<sup>27</sup> W. G. D. Fletcher and R. Augden (eds.), ‘The Shropshire Lay Subsidy Roll of 1327’, *Transactions of the Shropshire Archaeological and Natural History Society*, Part I, 3<sup>rd</sup> Series, VII (1907), pp. 369-378.

<sup>28</sup> Fletcher and Augden, ‘Shropshire Lay Subsidy Roll’.

<sup>29</sup> *Calendar of the Patent Rolls, Preserved in the Public Record Office, Edward III* (hereafter CPR) (London: Mackie and Co. Ltd. 1891-1916), VIII: 1338-1340 (1903), p. 175. See Chapter 4 for Edmund Pitchford's property transfers.

<sup>30</sup> Coss, *Origins of the English Gentry*, pp. 10-11.

<sup>31</sup> Coss, *Origins of the English Gentry*, pp. 10-11.

<sup>32</sup> Eleanora Carsus-Wilson, ‘Towns and Trade’, in A. L. Poole (ed.), *Medieval England* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1958), p. 251.

and discussed in Chapter 3 but not included as a defining factor in this study as explained in the introduction. This section has demonstrated some of the ways medieval historians have attempted to define and categorise the middling sort. Although none are in exact agreement with this study of Bridgnorth, elements of their studies can be seen in the actions of Bridgnorth's middling sort, as we will now discuss.

### **The strata and characteristics of the middling sort**

Regarding the definition of 'middling' in a medieval context, we must first acknowledge the nuances within this group. In the current study, the relationships between Bridgnorth's middling sort, the development of their town, and their status show various facets and nuances within this group. These factors also reveal the personal experiences of the people of Bridgnorth. Developments and relationships like these have been studied by Christopher Dyer in his discussion of the various strata of society. One of these is the "peasant elite" who functioned under the wider governmental powers, amid divisive elements, where Dyer suggests that cooperation in the localities emerged from the need to survive.<sup>33</sup>

Dyer shows that a peasant elite can be divided into an upper and lower strata where the lower regions of this peasant elite included the less prosperous traders and merchants and those who kept their trade in the locality, or in some cases, perhaps even within the town itself and used middlemen to transport goods further afield and had little involvement in the property market. We might anticipate something similar in towns, where the lowest strata of the middling sort would include those who held property in the town, which could include their living space above a shop. Some of these were undoubtedly closely connected to local peasant elites in the surrounding countryside. They might employ a journeyman, maid or apprentice. The more prosperous ranks of the middling sort were those who were removed by some social and economic distance from this lower strata but could still not claim a status near the gentry despite their growing wealth. Here we can place those who traded commodities from localities further afield and acted as the middlemen for those in the

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<sup>33</sup> Christopher Dyer, 'The English Medieval Village Community and its Decline', *Journal of British Studies*, 33 (1994), pp. 407-429.

lower strata of the middling sort. As such, this group could gain some control over trade networks and take a role in town governance, just as Dyer noted the function of the upper peasant elites in wider governmental powers. The upper levels of the middling sort in Bridgnorth were those who held the most extensive networks and governing powers. This could include the merchants who traded wholesale and who emulated gentry practices to the same standard as the gentry themselves which is discussed further through testamentary evidence in chapter 3. All sections of the middling sort behaved in this way in as far as their finances would permit. The lower strata of the middling sort demonstrated a mimicry of gentry practices just as those from the upper middling sort did but in a style that today would be called 'keeping up with the Joneses'.

Where town governance and civic duties are concerned, the upper strata of the middling sort began to take control over their town in much the same way the gentry had done in the period prior to the fourteenth century. These governance and civic roles within the town brought members of the differing strata of the middling sort together. The development of local government through the fourteenth century gave many members of the middling sort a civic role that functioned as a signifier of their status. This suggests that having achieved this role was definition enough of social status within their community. Examples of this are shown later in this chapter when we see the group of men who acted as bailiffs appear in the pattern of names for this select group. This group who held governing roles and, who also fit the criteria for this study, suggests that achieving a civic duty was related to how wide your network was which can also be seen in the people you witnessed deeds with.

The middling sort's rising status and wealth in local authority naturally mirrored actions originally held by members of the lower gentry and by the end of the fourteenth century, they began to intermarry and develop business relationships with the lower gentry, as discussed further in Chapter 2. The merging of the gentry and the wealthier middling sort families by marriage brought land and inherited wealth from gentry families into the middling sort. It could be argued that if such unions had not occurred, the gentry's position during the changes of the fourteenth century could have weakened.

This can be seen to reflect Dyer's point on cooperation in order to survive, whereas he noted this amongst the lower strata of the middling sort who kept their interests local. This could possibly have applied even more to the upper strata of middling sort and the lower gentry who needed to merge in order to secure and continue their place in society as the lower ranks prospered and competed with them. Further evidence of the merging of the middling sort with the lower gentry can be seen when the gentry became merchants and landlords within the town as a means to maintain their prosperous position by utilising the growing property and trade markets.

The fundamental reason for the rise in status of the middling sort in the fourteenth century was their wealth, but this was not the only signifier of their class as it only suggests at why they began to rise in prominence but not how we define them in this study as explained in the introduction. The wealth of the middling sort grew in the fourteenth century with the rise of commerce; in particular the profits from the wool trade, which began to burgeon at the end of the thirteenth century, and featured as a driving force in Bridgnorth. This was especially profitable for market towns where many of the middling sort could act as middlemen and sell produce from local small traders onwards to the wider market. The noticeable effects of this on society, during the early decades of the fourteenth century, saw the middling sort gain a financial position that allowed them to partake in and drive the development of tenement housing in the town and display a level of control over trade networks. Although academic studies have noted that trade and commerce elevated the power and influence of this group, this has often been as a secondary observation to their main focus on the trade and economic development of the period, neglecting the nuances of status and self-identification within this group as aimed for in this thesis. In the following section we examine further the witness lists of the evidentiary basis for this study in order to further define the group who made Bridgnorth's middling sort.

### **Deeds witness lists**

In the working definition of 'middling' applied here, the first criterion for membership of the middling sort, as also mentioned in the introduction alongside property holdings and the extent of one's personal networks, is that they witnessed at least

twelve deeds. For this criterion, the witness lists of the deeds are an instrumental factor when establishing the people who dominated the town and its governance and who appeared to be the driving force of the town. The three main reasons for the importance of witness lists when defining the middling sort of Bridgnorth are firstly the people who frequently appear as witnesses' shows their involvement in town affairs. Secondly, their surnames demonstrate the families who appear to dominate the middling sort. Thirdly, the regularity with which the same men tended to witness together demonstrates the networks which operated within this group. This information can be used to reveal the friendships and partnerships which were maintained amongst a small number of the town's middling sort during the boom period of Bridgnorth's development. Interestingly, there appears to be fewer people acting more frequently as witnesses in the decades that saw a rise in the number of deeds, the 1330s-1350s. Conversely, the earlier decades of the study show a greater number of people acting as witnesses but each person did so only once or twice.

The central group of Bridgnorth's middling sort is recognised through their surnames. These surnames show how the position of the middling sort and their role in governance was passed down through families and generations. In the fourteenth century, these names began to appear in the deeds and grew to dominance, while only few surnames from the late thirteenth century continued to appear. This may not seem surprising at first glance, as it could be argued that the population of Bridgnorth was not large enough for a wider range of families to appear in these lists. However, the population was greater in the middle decades than fifty years previously, so this is not necessarily the case. The surnames are further studied in the 1327 lay subsidy, and developed further below, which goes some way to explore the town's economic success and the social diversification of the middling sort through non-agricultural occupations which are shown in the surnames on this list.

The dominance of Bridgnorth's middling sort and this close group's governance is demonstrated further by individuals who were appointed bailiffs, *praepositi*, and how frequently individuals acted in this capacity. This is discussed using the network of John Glidde in the next section. Finally, the deeds contain a jury list from the 1390s,

a time when deeds of property transactions dwindled but more types of documents appeared, such as this jury list and a pedigree of the Baskerville family.

Further defining characteristics of the middling sort in this study, in addition to those individuals who not only witnessed at least twelve deeds, are also the number of times they witnessed as well as for whom they acted as a witness. Figure 4 below shows that in the 1350s, 121 deeds survive, but only 40 individuals acted as witnesses throughout the decade. The same number of people acted as witnesses through the 1280s but to only 33 deeds. Thus, on average, a person acted as a witness three times in the 1350s but would have only done so once fifty years earlier. The reason for this could simply be the increase in deeds which offered the opportunity to act as a witness, but the reason for this rise in the number of deeds can be attributed to the townspeople themselves. The land transferred in the deeds became concentrated in the town with mainly tenement properties, mostly held by these 40 individuals and their families, who do not appear to be of gentry heritage. This is in contrast to earlier deeds where individuals appeared to be of the gentry due to the estate lands transferred. In these early deeds we see individuals witnessed once in a decade which could be explained through family changes and inheritance meant one-off transactions. This is unlike the numerous transactions a tenement could go through when used by a landlord for income. Within the deed collection, the focus of the land becomes town centred as town development progressed through the increase of streets around the market place.<sup>34</sup> It is interesting to note that throughout the study period we never see more than 47 people act as a witness in any one decade and the decade where we see the 47 is the one with the least deeds. This confirms that as more properties were transferred, the group who controlled the property economy of Bridgnorth tightened to become a small collective.

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<sup>34</sup> See Chapter 4 for further discussion of this.

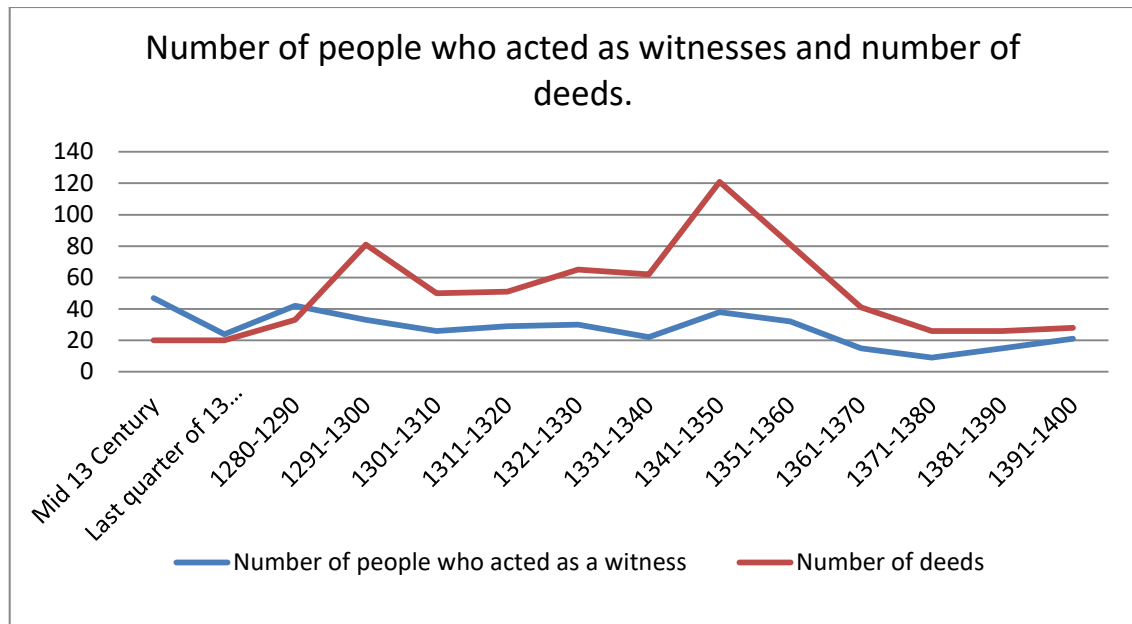


Figure 4 Witnesses against number of deeds by decade<sup>35</sup>

The witness lists for the boom period, the middle decades of the fourteenth century, show patterns of associations which are rare in earlier years of study however one does appear. Four of the 33 deeds in the 1280s reveal the same four men William de Mora, William Farnhales, William Wodeward and Richard Reed – acting as witnesses together, although the grantors and grantees are different sets of people each time.<sup>36</sup> This is in contrast to the middle decades of the fourteenth century where, due to the higher number of deeds and fewer men acting as witnesses, we see the same individuals witness for one another and often in deeds covering the same areas or streets showing the interest they all held through one location. This shows that their properties were transferred amid their own central group and thus consolidated this group's network and it is this group of 40 individuals who comprised the main body of Bridgnorth's middling sort during its boom period. Table 2 reveals the number of times an individual appeared in the witness lists by decade and reflects their involvement in the town.

<sup>35</sup> LLGC/NLW, Pitchford Hall (Ottley) Papers; SA, Mrs Dyas' Collection.

<sup>36</sup> LLGC/NLW, Pitchford Hall (Ottley) Papers, deeds 417, 1142, 1148, and 481. All deeds witnessed by the same men in the 1280s.



	Who witnessed most	Number of times witnessed
Mid-13th Century	Roger de Mora	8
Late 13th Century	Roger de Mora	5
1280-1290	Roger de Mora	19
1291-1300	Roger de Mora	13
1301-1310	Fremund Erditon	12
1311-1320	Edmund Palmer	18
1321-1330	Robert Palmer	30
1331-1340	John Glidde	19
1341-1350	John Rondulph	32
1351-1360	Henry Goldsmyth	21
1361-1370	Nicholas Palmer	16
1371-1380	John Tailor	13
1381-1390	William Goldsmyth	14
1391-1400	John Tailor	10

**Table 2 Individuals who witnessed the most often per decade<sup>37</sup>**

When looking at the names of those who are most active in the deeds witness lists, and therefore in the town, we see some of the families frequently appearing from the early decades of this study onwards. The De Moras, seen here to be led by patriarch Roger de Mora, and the Palmer family all show the next generation taking the place of the previous generation and maintaining an interest in the town's governance. The families who already held a high status in the town and could have been lower gentry, maintained their status by assimilating themselves in the way of the burgeoning middling sort who rose to meet them in terms of wealth in the middle decades of the fourteenth century. In Figure 4 above we see details of the next Palmer and De Mora generations holding the family position within the town's middling sort circle. These families could be seen as lower gentry, due to their appearance from the early decades of this study, and worked with the middling sort through their property holdings in the town. They moved into partnerships with families who appeared in the middle decades of the fourteenth century and who seemed to have no gentry bearing as seen below in Figure 5. This Figure shows some of the rising middling sort families such as the Pages and the Bagots, who are most notable in the middle decades of the

<sup>37</sup> LLGC/NLW, Pitchford Hall (Ottley) Papers; SA, Mrs Dyas' Collection.

fourteenth century but do not appear in the earlier deeds, alongside families who could be described as dynastic in Bridgnorth, such as the Baskervilles and the Corbets.

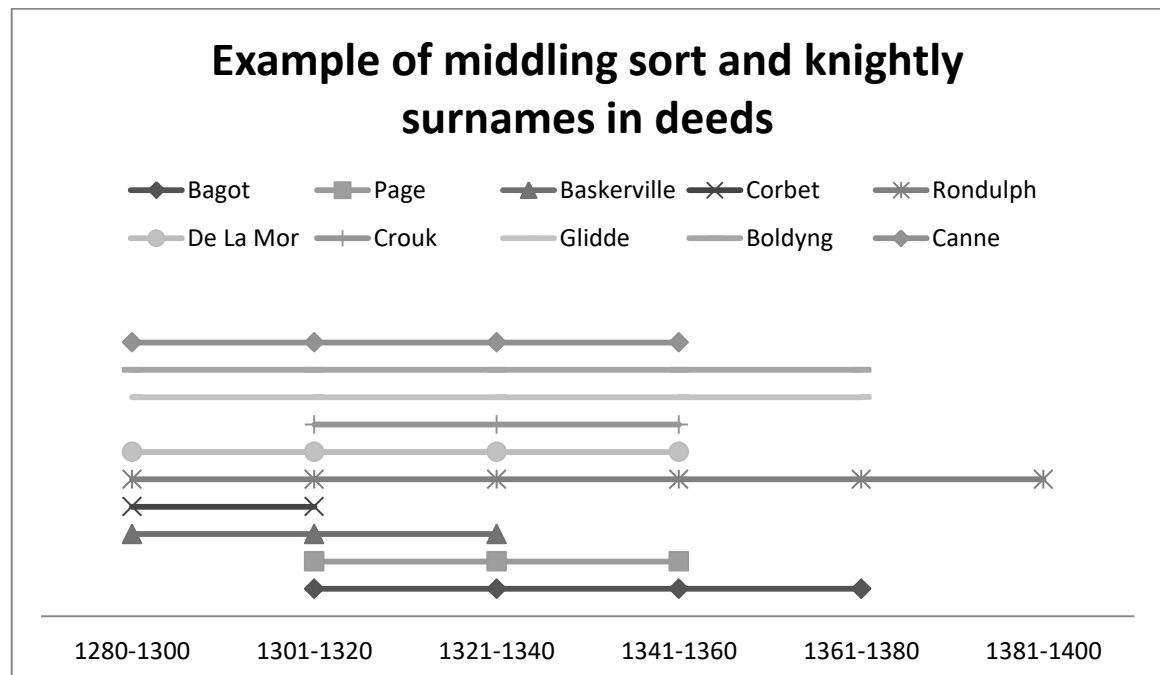


Figure 5 Families of the middling sort and the gentry during the fourteenth century<sup>38</sup>

The Bridgnorth evidence would seem to suggest that it was not only the middling sort who tried to emulate the practices of the gentry as their fortunes grew. The gentry itself maintained their position by acting in the same manner as the rising middling sort.<sup>39</sup> Here we witness the lower gentry holding tenements in the town and taking on civic duties, essentially “acting down” as the rising middling sort “acted up”. This is of particular interest, as Christine Carpenter suggested that the differentiation of the lower gentry and the middling sorts in rural communities was emphasised by their unique interests with the middling sort focusing on one location whereas and the gentry held interests in a broader territory and perhaps even holding land in another county.<sup>40</sup> This appears not to have been the case in the town of Bridgnorth.

The type of land transferred also reveals the changing behaviour of the merging groups. In the early decades, when more witnesses appeared less frequently, land and property transferred in the environs of Bridgnorth shows a higher number of arable areas. By contrast, in later decades, with a greater number of deeds and a more

<sup>38</sup> LLGC/NLW, Pitchford Hall (Ottley) Papers.

<sup>39</sup> Rigby, *English Society*.

<sup>40</sup> Carpenter, ‘Gentry and Communities’.

select group of witnesses, the land transferred was chiefly composed of tenements and town-based properties. Here, witnesses came mostly from the middling sort who used the town-based economy and commerce to improve their status ascent from within the burgeoning local economy.

In the following discussion the decade with the most deeds, 1341-1350, is utilised to further illustrate who Bridgnorth's middling sort were, as it shows those who appeared in the witness lists throughout this decade as shown in Table 3 below, and thus represented the leading families. This is shown by the fact that fathers, sons or brothers of family members appeared in the previous and next decades, respectively. Therefore, they monopolised the governance and growth of Bridgnorth's market in the boom period. The exceptions to this are individuals related to those appearing in the witness lists from the first decade of study, whose family name continued to appear through to the final decade, spanning the full study period of 1280-1400. William Selymon, John Croke, Robert Palmer, John Rondulph and William de Mora are all relatives of individuals who appeared in the deeds from the beginning of this study period, 1280. This could suggest they were of gentry heritage. The seal of John Rondulph, as discussed in Chapter 2, would appear to support this as it appears to hold armorial bearings. However, as the fourteenth century progressed, these men are greatly outnumbered by those whose family name only begins to appear in the first quarter of the fourteenth century.<sup>41</sup>

<b>Witnesses 1341-1350</b>	<b>Number of times Witnessed</b>
John Rondulph	32
<b>William Selymon*</b>	31
William de la hulle	31
John de Leghe	28
<b>John Croke*</b>	26
Nicholas Pitchford	24
Simon Dod	24
Robert Bergham	22
Roger de Eudenas	21

<sup>41</sup> LLGC/NLW, Pitchford Hall (Ottley) Papers.

Richard Bergham	21
John de Grene	20
Robert Pitchford	19
<b>John Palmer*</b>	19
John Glidde	18
Hugh Alderman	16
Thomas Skynar	16
<b>Robert Palmer*</b>	16
William Ashbourne	16
John de la Hulle	15
Hugh Dodemaston	14
Edmund Pitchford	14
John Canne	14
William Pitchford	13
Simon Aurifaber	13
<b>Richard de Mora*</b>	13
Reginald de la Hay	12
John Holband	12
Henry Goldsmyth	12
<b>Edmund Palmer*</b>	12
Edmund Kynesse	11
<b>William de Mora*</b>	10
Thomas Robert	9
Thomas le Forcer	7
John Pitchford	7
John de Upton	5
John de Stretton	4
John atte yates	2

**Table 3 Witnesses 1341-1530, and number of times witnessed<sup>42</sup>**

The evidence in Table 3 above would suggest that at this time, the upper middling sort were rising in social status, but they were still outranked by the lower gentry of the earlier period. After all, the top five men who witnessed most deeds all came from families who appeared in the late thirteenth century and came from inherited and landed wealth. However, it would be remiss to assume that the lower gentry still dominated the group, as the five are outnumbered by the remaining twenty six, not including the Palmers or the De Moras. Moreover, the position of the middling sort was emerging and was by no means fully established yet; here we focus

<sup>42</sup> LLGC/NLW, Pitchford Hall (Ottley) Papers; SA, Mrs Dyas' Collection.

on the mid-point. The transition phase can go some way in explaining the behaviour and stratification of Bridgnorth's middling sort's wealth. The overall image which begins to emerge of Bridgnorth's middling sort was of the lower gentry leading and the wealthiest members of the middling sort rising to meet them in town duties. It can also demonstrate the changing attitudes to wealth, which was a social and status currency. However, ideas of hierarchy never fully dissolved, as those with wealth but no heraldic heritage attempted to create their own as a way of further establishing their position, as is evident in the pseudo-heraldic designs on seals, discussed in Chapter 2. In this sense, it would appear that the middling sort felt they could only truly show their position through emulating characteristics of the gentry. In the following section we examine further the networks which operated within Bridgnorth's middling sort which strengthened their interests as defined in this study.

### **Personal networks**

This section focuses on the importance of networks to the middling sort. These networks were fundamental to maintaining and furthering the social position of individuals. Jonathan Barry has stressed the formative nature of 'association and collective action within a civic, and rural-urban, context'.<sup>43</sup> He has argued that association provided a strategy to cope with, and give structure to, the demands and insecurities of urban life. It occurred in business partnerships, communal festivities and in local government. By joining together to execute these various functions, the middling sort shared experiences and established common values: 'In every case, association was the crucial factor in the production of identity'.<sup>44</sup> Joan Kent argues that this group was united by the shared experience of parish administration, which drew together individuals of disparate taxable wealth and inventoried personal property.<sup>45</sup>

Outside of their professional and business lives, the middling sort cultivated a social persona in the town based on multiple social roles. These roles depended on a

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<sup>43</sup> Jonathon Barry, 'Bourgeois Collectivism? Urban Association and the Middling Sort', in J. Barry and C. Brooks (eds.), *The Middling Sort of People: Culture, Society and Politics in England: 1550-1800* (Basingstoke: MacMillan, 1994), p. 94.

<sup>44</sup> Barry, 'Bourgeois Collectivism', p. 94.

<sup>45</sup> Joan Kent, 'The rural "Middling Sort" in Early Modern England c 1640-1740: Some Economic and Socio-Cultural Characteristics', *Rural History*, 10 (1991), pp. 24-31.

network of interdependence with other members of the middling sort, especially those who were most publicly active and therefore held the most influence. Nurturing these networks strengthened the middling sort's social position, which they had gained through family, religious practices and patronage, trade, and local government. The most noticeable of Bridgnorth's middling sort are identified in the network of John Glidde, below and are also the leading members of this group who were listed in Table 3 above. They were a very active minority and noted for their prominent public roles. They had many contacts, resulting in such individuals being described by Shani d'Cruze as 'community brokers'.<sup>46</sup> These brokers held power within their network, which is why they were sought out to act as executors and office holders. This is confirmed by sigillographical evidence: the middling sort's mark was considered trustworthy, even if they were not an active party to the transaction. Below is an example of how this 'broker' network would work in Bridgnorth. Although individuals are identified, it is important to remember that the influence held was ultimately only recognised through these individuals' connections to each other and within their own town environment.

The first branch of an individual's network would be those who supported their status in public life and acted in one of the functions outlined above, as an executor, trustee or witness. They could also be landlords and employers which connected them further with others of their occupation or through tenorial ladders as rentier landlords, discussed in Chapter 4. Here, the duties of the executor of Nicholas Pitchford's will are used as an example to demonstrate and highlight the wide range of networks of a member of Bridgnorth's middling elite. Here we see the recovery of a bond for wool in the debt owed to Nicholas Pitchford, which was still outstanding at the moment of his death. Pitchford's widow, Johanna, was appointed an executrix of his will and called upon merchant William de Bobynton of London to recover the debt on her behalf in 1340.<sup>47</sup> The debt owed to Pitchford was for £160 from Reginald Conduit, who was described as a vintner in London and who also served two terms as

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<sup>46</sup> d'Cruze, 'Middling Sort', p. 184.

<sup>47</sup> CCR, V, p. 652, 83.

mayor of London.<sup>48</sup> This example demonstrates Nicholas's wealth in the sum claimed for the wool and also how a wealthy merchant could be one of the most prosperous middling sort of Bridgnorth and extend their network outside of their locality.

The choice of executors also demonstrates the networks which run through families. Johanna Pitchford, Nicholas's widow, chose Richard de Mughale and John de Longe as her executors. These men were known to the family through business networks and they were connected to Johanna's son, Edmund, as he rented property from them.<sup>49</sup> Edmund's family network expanded when he married Alice Rondulph, whose father, John, may have descended from lower gentry through the heraldic design on his seal, which is discussed further in Chapter 2.<sup>50</sup> John Rondulph's position and network is further seen in testamentary evidence. For example, he was bequeathed, by William de la Hulle, £18 as an aid for his daughters', Alice and Agnes's, marriages.<sup>51</sup> Other testamentary evidence also shows John Rondulph receiving 12 silver spoons from William de Cagweleye in 1349 and act as a broker or 'town friend' as he was called upon as power of attorney for Reginald le Heye in 1350.<sup>52</sup>

In the networks of the men mentioned in this passage, Nicholas Pitchford was the father of John Rondulph's son-in-law, Edmund Pitchford, who was owed a debt of £160 from the one-time mayor of London. William de la Hulle left money to John Rondulph's daughters to aid against their marriages. William and Nicholas were the two highest tax payers in the 1327 lay subsidy. Their network was strengthened further by the civic duties of William and John, who acted as witnesses and bailiffs together a number of times in the deeds (discussed further below). These connections demonstrate how the small group of the middling sort's wealthy elite of Bridgnorth maintained the strongest networks and supported one another in their close group.

Edmund Pitchford is also seen in his official duties in the deeds when he acted as a commissioner of oyer and terminer in 1348, the same year his brother, Nicholas,

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<sup>48</sup> CCR, V, pp. 652, 83; Caroline Barron, *London in the Later Middle Ages: Government and People 1200-1500* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), p. 329.

<sup>49</sup> LLGC/NLW, Pitchford Hall (Ottley) Papers, deed 375. See Appendix 1 for Edmund's tenurial ladder.

<sup>50</sup> LLGC/NLW, Pitchford Hall (Ottley) Papers, deed 331, will of William de la Hulle.

<sup>51</sup> LLGC/NLW, Pitchford Hall (Ottley) Papers, deed 331, will of William de la Hulle.

<sup>52</sup> LLGC/NLW, Pitchford Hall (Ottley) Papers, deed 566.

is seen trading wool.<sup>53</sup> In 1353, Edmund Pitchford was the subject of a commission himself when a commission of oyer and terminer was sent to William de Sharesall, John de Bagisore and Thomas Waure based on a complaint by William de Kirkeby, clerk. The complaint stated that William de Kirkby had hired some men and servants to harvest his crops at Erdyngton and sent others to collect the crops and bring them to his house, but a group of men stopped his servants from doing so and carried his goods away. The men who carried away the goods included, from Bridgnorth, Edmund Pitchford, John Palmer, Richard Collyng, Simon Dod, Nicholas Palmer, Robert de Stafford 'tanner', John de Glaselley, and John Collyng, all of whom appear in the common networks of the town and regularly in the deeds witness lists.<sup>54</sup> The reason for these men to carry the goods away was not given, but other information relating to the men would suggest they held status and some wealth in Bridgnorth and that this was not common outlawry.

Another example of a network is that of John Glidde. His network of contacts, in this case those he acted as a witness and bailiff with, is evidenced in the available deeds. Interaction and frequency of activity between individuals are useful indicators of middling and similar networks. Those in John's contacts were also those who appear most active in the deeds and held more social influence within the ruling middling sort of Bridgnorth.<sup>55</sup> John Glidde had twenty-four links with people in his witness/bailiff network and Table 4 below demonstrates the number of times he acted alongside them. We then take a step to show the networks of those in John Glidde's network with the number of times these individuals appear as an active party in a deed.

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<sup>53</sup> *CLP*, Edward III Vol. 8, 1348-1350, p. 175. Edmund Pitchford employed in a civic role in the commission of oyer and terminer. 'Oyer and Terminer' is defined as a case of court, Coredon and Williams, *Dictionary of Medieval Terms and Phrases* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), p. 208.

<sup>54</sup> *Calendar of Patent Rolls, Preserved in the Public Record Office: Edward III* (London: Mackie and Co. Ltd. 1981-1916), IX, 1350-1534 (1903)

Edward III vol IX, 1350-1534. See Chapter 3 for a discussion of the will of John Collyng.

<sup>55</sup> J. Boisservain, *Friends of Friends: Networks, Manipulators and Coalitions* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1974); E. Bott, *Family and Social Networks: Roles, Norms and External Relationships in Ordinary Families* (London: London University Press, 1971).



Name	Number of times they witness a deed with John Glidde	Number of times they appear in a deed as an active party
Robert Palmer	23	17
William de Ashbourne	13	12
Edmund Palmer	15	14
Nicholas Rondulph	13	11
William de la Hulle	29	13
Reginald la Heye	13	13
John Dod	4	10
William Bergham	16	15
Roger de Mora	6	18
Richard Robert	14	15
William Aurifaber	5	12
John Rondulph	27	19
Nicholas Pitchford	6	12
Thomas Glidde	3	13
Robert le Panier	1	
John Croke	26	22
Simon Dod	9	12
Robert Bergham	10	18
William Hondes	1	
John le Goldsmith	3	13
Simon Aurifaber	7	16
William de Mora	2	20
Edmund Pitchford	2	28
William Selymon	9	15

**Table 4 Personal network of John Glidde**

The period, in which John was active in the deeds spans twenty-two years, the period this network focuses on. John could be described as one of the town's "community brokers", as he also acted in the capacity as executor for wills, as well as a landlord, which shows his activities in the town through his friendships and relationships, as well as his business and civic duties. Within John Glidde's network we can see patterns of clusters appear, as he was often a witness to deeds alongside John Rondulph, William de la Hulle, whose testamentary evidence is studied in Chapter 3, and John Croke in up to twenty of the surviving deeds where he, John Croke, also

acted as a bailiff thirty four times.<sup>56</sup> The person most active in John Glidde's network was John Rondulph, who also held the office of bailiff alongside John Glidde in 1349 and witnessed deeds alongside him twenty-seven times. Friends of those individuals common to John's cluster would extend his network further, as friends of friends would bring a second and third degree to his network. All the individuals identified in the table above can be described as Bridgnorth's "community brokers" in their own right and all can be counted as part of Bridgnorth's middling sort.

The particular network described in the above example shows the effective links within Bridgnorth's middling governing group. Networks such as this illustrate the importance of each contact and how they can be utilised to reveal a core group. This group is further examined in the following section where we can consider the relevance of office holding, such as the appointment as bailiffs and the occupations of the men performing this duty.

### **Occupation and civic duty**

The wealth the middling sort gained brought status as well as positions of authority. These men can be identified through their trade such as Simon Dod, who was a baker. Further evidence of these men's trades can be found in the 1327 lay subsidy, which included names relating to occupation, industry and trades, such as 'dyer' (*dygher*), 'mercer', 'taylor' a 'glover', 'tanner' (*barcar*), 'potter', 'barber', 'baker' (*pistore*), and 'cook'.<sup>57</sup> Although it is to be remembered that names in the early fourteenth century may have become set names and therefore no longer represented the occupation of the current generation, however, they might still be a reflection of the tax payers' occupations. The deeds are helpful in this respect as a person's occupation is noted even if their surname does not suggest it and from this we can see the type of occupations which were most profitable, as these members of Bridgnorth's middling sort held wealth enough to be included in this leading group and work with the lower gentry.

The lay subsidy and the stated occupation of the witnesses support this study's

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<sup>56</sup> LLGC/NLW, Pitchford Hall (Ottley) Papers.

<sup>57</sup> LLGC/NLW, Pitchford Hall (Ottley) Papers, deed 331; Fletcher and Augden, *Shropshire Lay Subsidy Roll*, pp. 370-373.

findings of the social stratification of Bridgnorth. This also offers insight into the relative wealth of tax payers and may provide a further guide to who was middling and their relative wealth in that respect. From the total of sixty-seven taxpayers, over half (thirty-seven) paid 1s. or less. At the other end of the scale, nine paid 5s. and over, with the highest payment reaching 40s.<sup>58</sup> The men who were included in the subsidy and also appear in the witness lists of 1341-1530 include Nicholas Pitchford who paid 40s., William de la Hulle who paid 20s., John Croke who paid 10s., William Ashbourne who paid 3s. 4d., Simon Dod who paid 5s. John Glidde who paid 2s., John Rondulph who paid 2s., Edmund Palmer who paid 2s., Robert le Forcer who paid 12d., and William Selymon who paid 12d. This is not to say they held the most wealth, but it does offer a relative view as to the amount of wealth those in Bridgnorth's middling sort held at this time.<sup>59</sup> However, the information from the lay subsidy of 1327, as used here, while it is suggestive of an important criterion, has not been used as one of the principal criteria for identifying the middling sort as it is a single and static record. There are numerous reasons why a person may not have been included in the 1327 listing while still meeting the criteria to fit as middling in this study; the lay subsidy does however, as noted, go some way to demonstrate those assessed as the wealthiest members of the town.

The lay subsidy of 1327 can thus be seen as benchmark evidence when used in conjunction with the deed collection. Focusing on property between 1325 and 1330, the deed collection contains 35 deeds, 11.4% of which involve men who were identified in the lay subsidy as holding moveable wealth.<sup>60</sup> Although there are many issues when using the lay subsidy to determine a person's wealth, it does offer one example of the middling sort status in Bridgnorth. Men from Bridgnorth not mentioned in the subsidy may not have held enough moveable goods to meet the threshold, or, more likely, were absent for other reasons, despite appearing to hold property within the town.

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<sup>58</sup> LLGC/NLW, Pitchford Hall (Ottley) Papers, deed 331; Fletcher and Augden, *Shropshire Lay Subsidy Roll*, pp. 370-373.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid*; Pamela Nightingale, 'The Lay Subsidies and the Distribution of Wealth in Medieval England, 1275-1334', *The Economic History Review*, New Series, 57 (Feb, 2004), pp. 1-32.

<sup>60</sup> LLGC/NLW, Pitchford Hall (Ottley) Papers; SA, Mrs Dyas' Collection.

	S	d	Purchases	Sales			S	d	Purchases	Sales
Nicholas Pitchford	40		1			John Bryce		12		
William de la Hulle	20		1			Robert le Glover		12		
John Croke	10			2		William de Caldbroke		12		
Robert Wartoue	5					William Bonamy		12		
Simon Dod	5					John Cokes		12		
Adam de Sheymon	5		1			William Selymon		12		
Richard Bergham	4					Walter le Palmer		12	1	
Reginald de Leghe	4					William atte Sarda		12		
Richard Dod	4					John Dod		12		
John le Dygher	4					Peter le Mercer		12		
William de Ashbourne	3	4				Robert Pictores		12		
William Bergham	3					Roger le Coke		12	1	
William Haket	2		1			Walter Wodecot		12		
John Glydde	2					Alice le Palmer		12		
John Rondulph	2		4	2		Robert le Barbour		11		
John Bergham	2					Robert de Caunteryn		10		
Edmund le Palmer	2					Roger de Putton		9		
Thomas le Glover	2					Roger le Fonecar		8		
Nicholas Cheote	2					Auice Bouche		8		
Adam de Castro		20				Richard Mustard		8		
Richard le Potter		18				William de Eudon		8		
John de Strettone		18				Hugh Woderve		8		
Walter de Longe		18				John de Bagshaw		8		
John e Mercer		18				Hugh Pistore		8		
Peter le Mercer		18				John De Wyggmore		8		
William de Eundon		18				Nicholas ad Portam		6		2
John le Taylour		16		1		Simon le Cope		6		
Reginald Bryd		16				John le Bacour		6		
Roger le Longe		16	1			Robert Hoblet		6		
Roger de Swyney		13				Alice Wasal		6		
Robert le Fytheler		12				Nicholas Pistore		6		
Hugh Cissore		12				Roger le Somery		6		
John Tayllour		12				John de Tedestyle		6		

**Table 5 Lay Subsidy of Bridgnorth 1327**<sup>61</sup>

The two wealthiest men in the subsidy, William de la Hulle and Nicholas Pitchford, assessed at 20s and 40s respectively, are described as merchants.<sup>62</sup> When reading names in the subsidy it is to be remembered that personal names can be problematic by this period as they could now be family names and not necessarily a reflection of an individual's true occupation.<sup>63</sup> Only eleven men assessed in the 1327 lay subsidy were named amongst those active in land transfers and grants between 1300-1325. The lack of availability of other lay subsidies for Bridgnorth limit comparisons of wealth and trade in the fortunes of the middling sort in later years of the fourteenth century. Also, the date of 1327 is relatively early in the growth and dominance of Bridgnorth's middling sort, they are most active in the middle decades of the fourteenth century, three decades after this lay subsidy. As the fourteenth century progressed, the following generation drove the development of the town and saw their wealth increase as a result. The outcome of this is that they could move into new style housing and live in areas which today could be called 'suburbs'.

As noted, the weakness of only using the lay subsidy, when regarding wealth and occupation, is that it is a static record. To see how the middling sort dynamic changed I now offer an overview of the occupations from the beginning of the study period with those which appeared as the fourteenth century progressed. I conduct this overview using the evidence from the evidentiary basis described in the introduction. The role of a clerk (*magister*) is noted amongst the gentry families who dominated the early years of this study and as we move to the beginning of the fourteenth century, this role is joined by that of the steward, painter (*peyntour*), and forester.<sup>64</sup> John Canne, whose property endeavours are presented as a case study in Chapter 4, was described as a clerk in several deeds, demonstrating that he had the social standing inherent to this occupation as a member of the middling sort and who bought enough land in the town to create his own 'urban estate', a common

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<sup>61</sup> LLGC/NLW, Pitchford Hall (Ottley) Papers; SA, Mrs Dyas' Collection.

<sup>62</sup> LLGC/NLW, Pitchford Hall (Ottley) Papers, deed 361, William de la Hulle securing a bond as a wool merchant.

<sup>63</sup> As previously discussed when defining the middling sort.

<sup>64</sup> LLGC/NLW, Pitchford Hall (Ottley) Papers, deed 165.

enterprise for the wealthy middling sort.<sup>65</sup> The role of clerk continuously appears in the deeds, as does the role of goldsmith (*aurifaber*), following its first appearance in 1311.<sup>66</sup> From the 1330s to the end of the fourteenth century, the occupations which occur most frequently in the deeds are goldsmith, tailor, clerk, and dyer.<sup>67</sup> It would appear that trades specific to a town and its economy also regulated that economy. The control of the local economy was by the town elites, who included in their number men who could be seen to practice these trades from the 1330s onwards. These men were, for the most part, very active in a variety of markets and included wholesale merchants such as Nicholas Pitchford and William de la Hulle.<sup>68</sup> They were amongst the wealthiest of Bridgnorth's merchants and dealt in commodities. They were not merchants dealing in raw goods, who tended to be from the lower-ranked middling sort or maintained a position as a town-based trader. A more market focused view of the townspeople is reflected by the increase of non-agricultural names, which reveals the changing dynamics of Bridgnorth's wealth from rural to town activities. Men of trade and occupation also increasingly began to claim civic duties, especially from the boom period of the 1350s, where we also see the administrative duty of Alderman appear.<sup>69</sup>

One position which was held by the middling sort, although this was not a full-time occupation, was the role of bailiff, *praepositi*. As discussed in the introduction, the number of deeds increased in the middle decades of the fourteenth century but the number of men who acted as witnesses decreased, evidencing the tightening of the group of Bridgnorth's town elite. In the same way, fewer men acted as bailiffs in Bridgnorth in the boom period compared to the earlier decades, with an individual being reappointed several times throughout the decades

Table 6 below shows the number of individuals who acted as bailiff through the study period alongside the number of deeds for each decade.

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<sup>65</sup> LLGC/NLW, Pitchford Hall (Ottley) Papers, deeds 229, 399, 510, and 1314.

<sup>66</sup> LLGC/NLW, Pitchford Hall (Ottley) Papers, deed 34.

<sup>67</sup> LLGC/NLW, Pitchford Hall (Ottley) Papers; SA, Mrs Dyas' Collection.

<sup>68</sup> The merchant activities of Nicholas Pitchford are discussed further in Appendix 6 and the will of William de la Hulle is discussed further in Chapter 3.

<sup>69</sup> LLGC/NLW, Pitchford Hall (Ottley) Papers.

	Number of Bailiffs	Number of deeds
Mid-13th Century	12	20
Late 13th Century	11	20
1280-1290	9	33
1291-1300	11	81
1301-1310	7	50
1311-1320	9	51
1321-1330	8	65
1331-1340	8	62
1341-1350	11	121
1351-1360	10	81
1361-1370	7	41
1371-1380	6	26
1381-1390	6	26
1391-1400	7	28

Table 6 Number of bailiffs per decade<sup>70</sup>

It is clear from the table how small the leading group of the town became and, in turn, how powerful they became, especially when taking roles in local government. This is another way in which we can establish and identify Bridgnorth's middling sort. They were men who not only held the most wealth, which led to a monopoly over town property and tenements, but they also had a governing position within the town. In the above section, the number of times a person witnessed a deed was shown; in Table 7 below, we look at the same decades to show the number of times a person acted as a bailiff, on average three times overall, compared to 11 in the 1340s.<sup>71</sup>

Bailiff	Number of times they acted as Bailiff	Years they were appointed
John Rondulph	20	1341-1343, 1345-1347
William Selymon	13	1341-1343
William Pitchford	6	1341-1343
Richard Bergham	5	1343-1345
Robert Bergham	7	1343-1345
Edward Pitchford	6	1345-1347
William Ashbourne	3	1345-1347
John Croke	5	1347-1349
John Pitchhford	5	1349-1349
John de la Grene	5	1349-1351
William de Mora	4	1349-1351

Table 7 Individuals who acted as Bailiff, number of times and year<sup>72</sup>

The lists of bailiffs show that sons and brothers continued to hold a civic role in the town after their fathers and brothers respectively, demonstrating how these

<sup>70</sup> LLGC/NLW, Pitchford Hall (Ottley) Papers; SA, Mrs Dyas' Collection.

<sup>71</sup> LLGC/NLW, Pitchford Hall (Ottley) Papers; SA, Mrs Dyas' Collection.

<sup>72</sup> LLGC/NLW, Pitchford Hall (Ottley) Papers; SA, Mrs Dyas' Collection.

families monopolised Bridgnorth as the controlling wealthy middling sort. This close circle of men is seen through the partnerships and alliances which formed and developed as families married into one another, bringing the wealthy town elite into the lower gentry through marriage. Such a marriage is also seen in the case study of Edmund Pitchford's marriage to John Rondulph's daughter, Alice, and discussed further in Chapter 2. The civic partnership of these two men is clear from them acting as bailiffs together on a number of deeds once they had become father and son-in-law in 1347.<sup>73</sup>

### **Maintaining status**

The merging of the lower gentry and those without a heraldic heritage can be seen to strengthen the position of the lower gentry in the town as it ensured their survival and status. However, evidence from the gentry themselves suggests they felt the need to continually emphasise their inherited position in the region as a way of reminding the rising middling sorts of their "natural position". The Bridgnorth deeds contain evidence of the Baskerville family, who first appeared in the opening years of this study, 1280-1300 and decades prior to it, and who continued to appear throughout the deeds, although rarely. In 1241, prior to the start of this study period (1280-1400), Roger de Baskerville was called *dominus*, (Lord). In 1293, Hugh de Baskerville was also called *dominus* when Margery, his widow, executed his will, demonstrating their knightly heritage. Members of the family who appear in later decades are not referred to as *dominus*, although this could simply be a change in the diplomatic form of address in the deeds.<sup>74</sup>

As the fourteenth century progressed, the Baskerville family are seen in the deeds but not as active parties: no one member of the family appeared to regularly concern themselves with town-based property transfers, which dominate the deeds. What is interesting is that in the final decade of the study period, in 1398, the Baskervilles had a pedigree created for themselves. The reasons for this are not clear, but it could be that as the fourteenth century progressed, the family refrained from

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<sup>73</sup> LLGC/NLW, Pitchford Hall (Ottley) Papers, deeds 1295 and 389. John Rondulph and Edmund Pitchford acting as bailiffs. Deeds 404, 57, 266, 58, 27: John Rondulph giving land to Edmund and Alice, John's daughter, prior to marriage.

<sup>74</sup> LLGC/NLW, Pitchford Hall (Ottley) Papers, deed 1292, Margery acting as an executor for Hugh Baskerville; deed 1425, Roger de Baskerville.



becoming active members of the middling sort as the lower gentry had done. Then, late in the fourteenth century, they realised that they needed to reaffirm their position in landed society through the creation of this document. The family pedigree could also have been created for inheritance purposes, as estates and land had been divided in the fourteenth century. As the many transfers of land in the environs of Bridgnorth suggest, the Baskervilles' land may have become divided out of the family and the Baskerville name. The Pedigree is specific in tracing the descendants from Roger de Baskerville down to Elen, daughter of Thomas Worthyn, which could suggest proof of inheritance rights.<sup>75</sup> The actual purpose for the document's creation cannot be confirmed, but it is of note that despite the rising wealth and status of the middling sort, the gentry still sought to maintain their position in a period of changing social dynamics and to reaffirm this through a physical document confirming the position they had held in the area a century previously.

It could be said that the position the gentry naturally held in the previous century, a position which was now being filled by the wealthy middling sort, was decreased partly through the lower gentry's own actions. In 1398, as we see the Baskerville pedigree appear, we also see a jury list. The list is not specific to Bridgnorth, it is for the neighbouring area of Pykethorne and includes the names of twenty-four men.<sup>76</sup> As K. B. Post noted in his study of jury lists in the fourteenth and fifteenth century, the wealthy middling sort or 'local men' undertook the role which the gentry would have carried out a century before.<sup>77</sup> Perhaps it was the gentry's slow withdrawal from roles such as this that saw them needing to reaffirm their status when they realised that their natural position could be challenged by the changing social climate.

## **Marriage and remarriage**

Status appears to have been keenly felt in the social climate of fourteenth-century Bridgnorth and not only by the gentry but also by those who wished to maintain their newly gained status. We have identified how men led the way to status and wealth in the study period, but the remaining part of this chapter is dedicated to identifying

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<sup>75</sup> LLGC/NLW, Pitchford Hall (Ottley) Papers, deed 1383, Baskerville pedigree.

<sup>76</sup> LLGC/NLW, Pitchford Hall (Ottley) Papers, deed 991, jury list.

<sup>77</sup> Post, 'Jurors and Jury Lists', p. 68.

how women gained and maintained their social position in the middling sort through marriage and remarriage, before including the experience of remarriage for men, briefly discussed towards the end of the chapter. In the case of Alice Rondulph below, we see a woman from a family possibly holding gentry status, who needed to remarry to maintain and strengthen her position after she had been widowed. This is an obvious example of the precarious nature of social status: once gained, it was never absolutely certain and could just as easily be lost.

Women's status depended on that of their husband as they were disadvantaged from birth in education, occupation and access to political roles. When the woman became widowed, her status became precarious and remarriage within her social group may have been the only way to maintain it. The status of the middling sort was precarious and dependent on factors beyond their control, such as the success of the property market, trade relations and, in agricultural areas, the weather. But if this was the case for the whole of the middling sort, and in particular for men who were actively taking part, what about the precarity for women? They were denied a role in public office and trade at the level of the men referred to above. Thus, marriage was often their best resort.

The times in a woman's life cycle which could be precarious for her social status were marriage and old age, times where women had to negotiate less formal support than men. As Peter Earle suggests, this left a 'deficit' of single or widowed women among the middling sort, reinforcing the centrality of marriage in ensuring women's entry and survival within this group.<sup>78</sup> In other studies of the middling sort, women have tended to be ignored or be seen as accessories to men. Upward mobility for women and a change in status could be provided by marriage to a man of a higher status. This status was however never entirely secured, as the death of a husband could be the beginning of a drop out of middling status. A young widow wishing to maintain her status had to marry again in the middling sort in order to maintain her

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<sup>78</sup> V. Brodsky, 'Single Women in the London Marriage Market 1580-1619', in R. B. Outhwaite (ed.), *Marriage and Society* (London: London University Press, 1981), pp. 87-100; L. Charles and L. Duffin (eds.), *Women in Pre-Industrial England* (London: Croom Helm, 1985); M. Prior (ed.), *Women in English Society 1500-1800* (Cambridge: Cambridge University press, 1985); D. Kent, 'Family Breakdown 1750-91', *Local Population Studies*, 45 (1990), pp. 27-42.

position, actions which we can see in the remarriage of Alice Rondulph, used as a case study below. It was only those who had access to wealth who could remain widows and maintain their status. Widows from Bridgnorth, such as Johanna Pitchford, the widow of wealthy merchant Nicholas, could live off investments of property or provisions from their husbands. As such they could not make profits themselves but were left in a social status dictated to them from their nearest male kin.

Pressures from family and friends to remarry would also have played an important part in a woman's decision to remarry, as would the expectations of their community. Throughout the Middle Ages, social status was a factor in deciding whether or not a widow should remarry. As Philadelphia Ricketts suggested, 'status is its own form of social "wealth"'.<sup>79</sup> The social pressure women felt to remarry and the data which reflects this is informative to this study, however the below cases from Bridgnorth can only be placed amidst the wider framework of remarriage patterns due to the limited examples from Bridgnorth.

Many studies have focused on marriage in the Middle Ages such as Ruth Mazo Karras' study which explores the unions of men and women in the Middle Ages and why some unions of the period may not be recognised as "marriage".<sup>80</sup> Karras tells of the intersecting criteria of what made a marriage, for instance, how a partner's status could affect the meaning of the relationship and its recognition in wider society. Karras argues that the lower the status of the woman compared to that of the man, the greater the likelihood that it was considered a marriage. Essentially, that their society did not recognise a wife as having a higher status than her husband. In this, Karras genders the inequality and also explores status using other markers, such as different religious affiliations. Karras notes that expectation was often driven by society rather than by official decrees, highlighting case studies to conclude that the legal and social union of marriage was recognised in the first instance not by the legal contract but by the social and legal statuses of the partners.<sup>81</sup>

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<sup>79</sup> Philadelphia Ricketts, *High-Ranking Widows in Medieval Iceland and Yorkshire: Property, Power, Marriage and Identity in the Twelfth and Thirteenth Centuries* (Leiden: Brill, 2010).

<sup>80</sup> Ruth Mazo Karras, *Unmarriages: Women, Men and Sexual Unions in the Middle Ages* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2012), p. 9.

<sup>81</sup> Karras, *Unmarriages*, pp. 5-6.

These themes are reflected in Bridgnorth's situation, where the middling sort sustained their position in society and strengthened it through their relationships with the gentry. To this end, the case study of Edmund Pitchford and Alice Rondulph's marriage is particularly relevant. This union, according to Karras's argument, highlights the status of Edmund Pitchford in the middling sort. Karras suggests that women who held resources of land and money would often have their male relatives exercise control over any union they entered into. Their partner was expected to meet them in status, religious affiliation, and essentially belong to their own social group.<sup>82</sup> We can thus conclude that John Rondulph, Alice's father, was satisfied with the family from which Edmund came – being the son of one of the wealthiest men in Bridgnorth, Nicholas Pitchford.<sup>83</sup>

Social and economic proximity were clearly important. Other studies of medieval towns have identified this as an important feature as, for instance Shannon McSheffrey's examination of marriage and culture in late medieval London.<sup>84</sup> According to McSheffrey, the middling sort's marriage patterns in London suggest that the partners would have known one another, unlike in some unions of the elites, and that these acquaintances would have been the result of economic and socioeconomic factors.<sup>85</sup> McSheffrey's work reflects that of Karras' and supports the case made here about status and marriage in Bridgnorth, but her work focuses on fifteenth-century London. In addition RaGena DeAragon and Joel Rosenthal, who have both conducted studies into the nobility and remarriage in the higher ranks of society, note that most widows remarried within one to two years of widowhood.<sup>86</sup> Although some widowhoods appeared very short, with one widow in the study remarrying within days of becoming a widow, most remarried within the next ten months. A few waited a

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<sup>82</sup> Karras, *Unmarriages*, p. 70.

<sup>83</sup> The wealth of Nicholas is discussed further in Chapter 2 in relation to the illuminated letter in a grant for masses he had. Appendix 6 also demonstrates his wealth by the sum due for his wool which was seized in Bruges.

<sup>84</sup> Shannon McSheffrey, *Marriage, Sex and Civic Culture in Late Medieval London* (Pennsylvania: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2006).

<sup>85</sup> McSheffrey, *Marriage*, p.19.

<sup>86</sup> RaGena C. DeAragon, 'Dowager Countesses, 1069-1230', in Christopher Harper Bill (ed.), *Anglo-Norman Studies: Proceedings of the Battle Conference*, 17 (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 1994), pp. 87-100; Joel T. Rosenthal, 'Aristocratic Widows in Fifteenth Century England', in B.T. Harris and J. K. McNarmara (eds.), *Women and the Structure of Society* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1984), pp. 36-47.

number of years, up to ten, before remarrying, but the average was three years.<sup>87</sup> Although DeAragon's study focused on the eleventh to thirteenth century and Rosenthal's on the fifteenth, their findings complemented each other. As Rosenthal stated:

Widowhood was not a common lot in the sense of embracing any essential set of attendant characteristics. In its multi-fold variety widowhood was but another facet of the role allotted to women in the social structure.<sup>88</sup>

The rise of commerce in the market town and the wealth it brought to the prospering middling sort played an important role in marriage alliances, which in previous centuries would have been a predominant focus of the nobility. Barbara Hanawalt argued that women were a conduit for wealth and it was through marriage that they had the largest economic impact.<sup>89</sup> Remarriage was of particular importance and caused fluid movement of capital wealth, real estate and valuable items.<sup>90</sup> To see the reasons for remarriage or not in Bridgnorth the following sections focus on Johanna Pitchford before leading on to discuss the remarriage of Alice Rondulph.

### **Case Study: Johanna Pitchford**

The case study of the Pitchford family provides an opportunity to look in detail at Johanna Pitchford, wife of wealthy Bridgnorth merchant Nicholas Pitchford. Johanna did not appear to remarry following the death of Nicholas and there are a number of potential reasons for her continued widowhood. Nicholas Pitchford's will has not been located and the exact wealth and property he left can only be surmised. He is listed as one of the wealthiest landowners in Shropshire in the 1327 lay subsidy, but this does not mean he still held the same level of wealth at the time of his death, 1341.<sup>91</sup> However, evidence would suggest he still prospered, judging by the quantity of wool he transported and the debt of £160 collected by his executors following his death.

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<sup>87</sup> DeAragon, 'Dowager Countesses', p. 90; Rosenthal, 'Aristocratic Widows', p. 39.

<sup>88</sup> Rosenthal, 'Aristocratic Widows', p. 40.

<sup>89</sup> Barbara Hanawalt, *The Wealth of Wives: Women, Law and Economy in Late Medieval London* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), p. 6; Caroline Barron and Anne F. Sutton (eds.), *Medieval London Widows 1300-1500* (London: Hambledon Press, 1994).

<sup>90</sup> Hanawalt, *Wealth of Wives*, p. 6.

<sup>91</sup> Fletcher and Augden, *Shropshire Lay Subsidy Roll*, pp. 370-373.

Nicholas would have left Johanna a comfortable living while making her an appealing prospect to other men, but this wealth may have allowed her the means to live alone.<sup>92</sup>

Under law, once widowed, Johanna would not have been bound by any legal guardianship, but widowhood was a precarious situation for some women, sometimes resulting in ongoing poverty, even if it also could leave a widow with a particular legal status.<sup>93</sup> Johanna's family origins are unknown, but she would presumably have had a dower and a dowry which she could take into another marriage, as well as any assets left to her by Nicholas.<sup>94</sup> In the case of a mercantile widow such as Johanna, where a husband's wealth could take the form of sacks of wool or debts owed to them, under her widow's share of *legitim* she could find herself in possession of extremely valuable assets.<sup>95</sup> Barbara Hanawalt suggested the falling population and accumulations of wealth during the later fourteenth century was not only due to the effects of the plague but might also be attributed to widows and heiresses deciding against remarriage; we might surmise that something similar applied in the case of Johanna in the immediate pre-plague period.<sup>96</sup>

It is only from documents issued after her death that we can be sure Johanna never remarried, as the failure of her executors to fulfil their role of executing her will, created a deed which outlined this. In this deed, Johanna was still referred to as

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<sup>92</sup> See Chapter 3 for a discussion of William de la Hulle and John Collyng providing a living place for their wives.

<sup>93</sup> A. J. Kettle, "'My Wife Shall Have It': Marriage and Property in the Wills and Testaments of Late Medieval England', in E. M. Craik (ed.), *Marriage and Property* (Aberdeen: Mercat, 1984), pp. 89-103; Kathryn Kelsey Staples, *The Daughters of London: Inheriting Opportunity in the Late Middle Ages* (Leiden: Brill, 2011); Sally A. Livingston, *Marriage, Property, and Women's Narratives* (New York: Palgrave, 2012); Mia Korpiola, *Regional Variation in Matrimonial Law and Custom in Europe, 1150-1600* (Leiden: Brill, 2011).

<sup>94</sup> A dowry was the bride's contribution to the marriage and could include land, money, chattels, clothing and fine objects. A dower was the husband's contribution to the marriage and was contractually promised to come to the wife if she outlived him. See Coredon and Williams, *Dictionary of Medieval Words and Phrases*.

<sup>95</sup> Mavis Matte, *Women in Medieval English Society* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), p. 86.

<sup>96</sup> Hanawalt, *Wealth of Wives*, p. 7; Barron and Sutton, *London Widows*; Wendy Davies, *Property and Power in the Early Middle Ages* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995); Rosemary Horrox, *The Black Death* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1994).

‘Pitchford’ at the time of her death.<sup>97</sup> Reasons for Johanna’s ongoing widowhood may have been solely her choice, but there is also the possibility that Nicholas left instructions in his will, as some husbands did, that he would not permit his wife to take her inheritance from their marriage into a new marriage, requiring her to forfeit it if she did remarry. Jenny Kermode highlights such cases from Beverly where Elias Casses insisted his widow take vows to this end before inheriting his land, while John Stockdale left property to his wife on condition that she did not remarry.<sup>98</sup> Reginald de Conduit, a prominent London citizen and active member of the merchant financiers to the king, who was known to Nicholas Pitchford, left his wife, Leticia, rents and tenements on the condition that she remained ‘unmarried and behaves herself well’.<sup>99</sup>

The personal desire of widows who did not wish to enter into another marriage can, without firm evidence, only be surmised, but children appear to have been one factor in a widow’s choice of whether to remarry or not. In Hanawalt’s study of London widows, she suggests those with under-age children would feel a sense of duty to provide for them and this may have been a leading factor in their decision to remarry.<sup>100</sup> Likewise, if a widow was young and yet to have children, a new marriage would have offered her another opportunity for established marital life and its associated security. In cases from Bridgnorth, Edmund Pitchford and his wife Alice, discussed in more detail below, did not have appear to have children as none are declared in his testamentary evidence, nor are children referred to in Alice’s testamentary evidence following her second marriage.<sup>101</sup> However, despite not having children together, Edmund’s probate outlined provisions for his illegitimate daughter, Agnes.<sup>102</sup> It would appear that the security of marriage was a driving factor in the

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<sup>97</sup> Johanna chose Richard de Mughale as an executor of her will, although he died of plague before he could carry out her bequests. *CCR*, VIII, p. 192; Bruce Gordon and Peter Marshall (eds.), *The Place of the Dead: Death and Remembrance in Late Medieval and Early Modern Europe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000); Caroline Barron and Clive Burgess (eds.), *Memory and Commemoration in Medieval England: Proceedings of the 2008 Harlaxton Symposium* (Donington: Paul Watkins, 2010).

<sup>98</sup> Kermode, ‘Sentiment and Survival’, p. 8.

<sup>99</sup> Sharpe, Reginald R. (ed.), *Calendar of Wills, Proved and Enrolled in the Court of Hustings, Proved and Enrolled in the Court of Hustings, London, 2 vols.* (London: John C. Francis, 1889-1895), I: 1258-1358 (1889), pp. 198-499. My thanks to Elizabeth New for bringing Reginald de Conduit’s will to my attention.

<sup>100</sup> Hanawalt, *Wealth of Wives*, p. 104.

<sup>101</sup> LLGC/NLW, Pitchford Hall (Ottley) Papers, deed 322.

<sup>102</sup> LLGC/NLW, Pitchford Hall (Ottley) Papers, deed 236, Edmund Pitchford’s probate record. Lineage and family land for the land in Alice’s dowry, which had to return to her family if both she and Edmund died without heirs, is discussed further with regards of fee tail in Chapter 4.

decision to remarry unless the widow was left well off and of an age where she could live as a dowager. In the case of younger women who sought to remarry it could have been that their husbands had yet to achieve a secure status or wealth in the town and that they felt driven to remarry in order to secure their place in society and perhaps that of young children. We now turn to the remarriage of Alice Rondulph, her decision to remarry and the possible reasons behind her choice.

### **Alice Rondulph's marriages**

The remarriage of widows and concern over a woman's married state are, as noted by Barbara Hanawalt, driven by pressures from family and society; such pressures could be intense, especially where wealth was concerned.<sup>103</sup> Following Edmund Pitchford's death in 1354, his widow, Alice, could have been in possession of some wealth and therefore may have felt the pressure to remarry. It has also been noted that Edmund and Alice did not have children and she may have felt that remarriage would give her another opportunity of motherhood. Alice was one of two daughters of John Rondulph, who appears in the witness and bailiff list above. She married Edmund, the son of Bridgnorth's wealthy merchant Nicholas Pitchford. Following Edmund's death she remarried and relocated to Chester.

Alice appears to have remarried soon after Edmund's death, which is in line with R. S. Schofield and E. A. Wrigley's findings, although their information is based upon early modern parish records, unlike Hanawalt's work on medieval London as previously stated. Their evidence does however reveal that almost half of all remarriages took place within a year of a woman's widowhood.<sup>104</sup> Canon law did not specify a precise period of mourning in which a widow could not remarry, nor did society appear to challenge any haste in remarriage, so remarriages could take place soon after a husband's death.<sup>105</sup> Alice Rondulph's decision to remarry quickly can only

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<sup>103</sup> Hanawalt, *Wealth of Wives*, p. 106.

<sup>104</sup> R. S. Schofield and E. A. Wrigley, 'Remarriage Intervals and the Effect of Marriage Order on Fertility in Marriage and Remarriage', in J. Dupaquier, E. Helin, and M. Livi-Bacci (eds.), *Population of the Past* (London: Routledge, 1981), pp. 212, 214; Hanawalt, *Wealth of Wives*, p. 106.

<sup>105</sup> Michael M. Sheenan, 'The Influence of Canon Law on the Property Rights of Married Women in England', in M. Sheenan and J. Farage (eds.), *Marriage, Family and Law in Medieval Europe: Collected Studies* (University of Wales Press, Cardiff, 1996), pp. 16-30, 121. The short period before remarriage appears to be a feature in pre-industrial populations, with the idea of a prolonged period of mourning arriving in the Reformation. Peter Franklin, 'Peasant Widows' "Liberation" and Remarriage before the Black Death', *The Economic History Review*, 39 (1986), pp. 186-204.



be speculated about, but the abrupt loss of Edmund, where the deeds state he was 'feloniously killed' may have been an influence.<sup>106</sup> This sudden loss also meant the sudden loss of a secure household environment. Despite any social advantages Alice may have had in Bridgnorth through her natal family, remarriage would have provided some security during plague years.<sup>107</sup>

Both Edmund Pitchford, Alice's first husband, and Richard Bruin, her second, appear to have operated in similar ways within their towns, for example owning property as landlords, holding and leasing tenements and holding civic duties. This demonstrates that Alice married within her social group when remarrying Richard and moving from Bridgnorth to Chester. She thus maintained a high middling sort status, but, as mayor of Chester, it is likely Richard held a higher status and wealth than Edmund.<sup>108</sup> Despite living in market towns, neither Edmund nor Richard are seen to be or identified as merchants. Instead, they were men of property, although this is not to suggest they never engaged in some form of trade. It could be suggested that Richard was also involved in trade and undertook such activity alongside his civic role as mayor in much the same way Reginald de Conduit held the position of mayor of London but was also a wealthy wool merchant trading with Nicholas Pitchford, Edmund's father.<sup>109</sup> Chancery records of the Statute Merchant reveal Richard Bruin witnessing a debt from another Richard who was described as Richard, citizen of London, to creditor Stephen de Kelsall, citizen and merchant of Chester for £600 for diverse merchandise bought from him in 1355, illustrating the form of trading connections we might expect from members of a market town's middling sort, especially someone of mayoral status.<sup>110</sup>

The social and economic nature of Alice's choice of second husband follow the marriage patterns illustrated by Joel Rosenthal, who noted that continuity, parity

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<sup>106</sup> CCR Writ 441, date 1361. Evidence of John Pullileye outlawed for 'felonious killing' Edmund Pitchford, p. 166.

<sup>107</sup> See Chapter 4, Bridgnorth's urbanisation.

<sup>108</sup> LLGC/NLW Pitchford Hall (Ottley) Papers, deeds 38, 46, 1293.

<sup>109</sup> Reginald de Conduit also served as a Sherriff in London in 1320-1 and as Mayor in 1334-5 and 1335-6. Caroline Barron, *London in the Later Middle Ages: Government and People 1200-1500* (Oxford, 2004), pp. 327-329.

<sup>110</sup> TNA Website, *Discovery*: C 241/134/159

<http://discovery.nationalarchives.gov.uk/details/r/C9681069> (Accessed 09/09/2019)

and bridging of personal areas were considered when choosing a second husband.<sup>111</sup> A woman's social status and her place in a community could of course be dictated by marriage and remarriage, which would move the new wife up or down the social ranks. However, widows such as Alice, who resided comfortably in the affluent middling sort, were likely to, as Alice did, remarry someone equal to her late husband's status or higher. Rosenthal noted, in his study of remarriage amongst the nobility, that the second husband would typically be a socioeconomic equal of the first husband, if not necessarily an immediate friend or associate.<sup>112</sup>

The deeds in this study reveal that Alice remarried within her social group and maintained the social circles and associations from her first marriage. Such continuity was not always guaranteed, as a widow or wife in a subsequent marriage might choose not to identify with a past husband and his family. However, in the case of Alice, she did and appeared to maintain an association with Edmund's brother, Nicholas, who assisted her in the execution of Edmund's will when appointing an attorney on her behalf.<sup>113</sup> Although Nicholas, Edmund's brother and Alice's brother-in-law, held an interest in the execution of Edmund's will, the extent of his involvement is not clear from the available deeds. He did however act as a witness to a number of grants Alice made when acting as an executrix for Edmund.<sup>114</sup> The extent to which Alice's loyalty to the family of her previous husband extended within her new marriage cannot be ascertained with certainty through the deeds. However, as discussed in the following chapter, she did keep one of Edmund's seals, suggesting she wished to maintain a part of her status and connection with this marriage and Edmund's family.

Maintaining bonds with a previous family could also be considered the means by which a widow maintained the social status she had previously enjoyed; she might use these bonds as a way to reintegrate herself into her community. A new

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<sup>111</sup> Joel T. Rosenthal, 'Fifteenth Century Widows and Widowhood: Bereavement, Reintegration and Life Choices', in Sue Sheridan Walker (ed.), *Wife and Widow in Medieval England* (Ann Arbor, Michigan: University of Michigan Press, 1993), pp. 33-59

<sup>112</sup> Rosenthal, 'Fifteenth Century Widows', p. 38.

<sup>113</sup> LLGC/NLW Pitchford Hall (Ottley) Papers, deed 1328, Nicholas Pitchford appointing an attorney on Alice's behalf.

<sup>114</sup> LLGC/NLW, Pitchford Hall (Ottley) Papers, deed 1328.

marriage also presented opportunities and connections which widowhood had previously denied her. The introduction of a new household and economic unit could elevate the socioeconomic status of a wife, where a choice to stay a widow may have caused social isolation and smaller economic gains. Remarriage could therefore ensure reintegration and acceptance back into society for a widow; such considerations could also account for the speed of some remarriages, with most taking place within a few years of a husband's death. It would appear that the longer widowhood continued, the more likely it was to remain a widow's lot.

### **Remarriage of men and women**

Alice Rondulph's marriage to Richard Bruin, citizen of Chester, was a second marriage for them both. Records show Richard and John de Salghale, parson, acting as executors for Richard Bruin's first wife, also named Alice, in 1365.<sup>115</sup> In 1354, the year of Edmund Pitchford's death, Richard Bruin was in receipt of goods and money bequeathed to him by his wife, showing that he was still executing her will a decade later.<sup>116</sup> The interesting note here is not that Richard was his wife's executor, but that she made a will at all, as many wives of the middling sort would not have done so. After all, their property was under their husband's authority. The period following the granting of his wife's probate, during which Richard continued to fulfil this duty as executor for his first wife, overlapped with his remarriage to Alice Rondulph. In 1357, Richard received land with his wife Alice, Edmund's widow, during the time Alice was herself executing Edmund's will, a task she continued to do until 1360.<sup>117</sup>

No age was given for Alice Rondulph at the time of her marriage to Edmund, but we know the marriage must have occurred between 1340 and 1345.<sup>118</sup> It may often have been the case that wives were younger than their husbands, who may

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<sup>115</sup> LLGC/NLW, Pitchford Hall (Ottley) Papers, deed 302.

<sup>116</sup> LLGC/NLW, Pitchford Hall (Ottley) Papers, deed 2447.

<sup>117</sup> LLGC/NLW, Pitchford Hall (Ottley) Papers, deed 308. This is Richard Bruin's second wife, Alice nee Rondulph.

<sup>118</sup> Marriage patterns, focusing on neo-locality and household formation, have been studied by: Georges Duby, *Love and Marriage in the Medieval Ages* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1994); Christopher Nugent Brooke, *The Medieval Idea of Marriage* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1994); L. R. Poos, *A Rural Society after the Black Death, Essex 1530-1525* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), pp. 141-2; and E. A. Wigley, 'European Marriage Patterns and their Implications: John Hajnal's Essay and Historical Demography during the Last Half-Century', in C. Briggs, P. M. Kitson, and S. J. Thompson (eds.), *Population, Welfare and Economic Change in Britain 1290-1834* (Boydell Press, Woodbridge, 2014), pp. 15-41.

have waited until they had gained some success before marrying. Alice and Edmund did not appear to have children, as noted above, and it was common for young widows and those with under-age children to remarry quickly; this was possibly the case for Alice. The death of Edmund in 1354 alongside records of Alice and Richard receiving land together in 1357 would suggest theirs was indeed a reasonably quick remarriage.<sup>119</sup> If Alice and Edmund did not have children, Alice's second marriage also appeared to be unsuccessful in this regard, as no children are referred to in her will.<sup>120</sup> Caroline Barron however cautions that women's wills could fail to mention children and friends as a verbal instruction to the executors may have already outlined provisions for them.<sup>121</sup>

### **Men remarrying**

While focusing on the remarriage of Alice Rondulph, it is important to note that men also frequently remarried, as was the case for Alice's second husband Richard. The social and economic benefits of remarriage for men may have been felt just as keenly as they were for widows, although for different reasons. For men, the stability of their household's economic unit would have been of importance to their social status and position in their community, one which would benefit from a wife and her household management. Marrying within the middling sort would have brought a dowry of some kind which, at this level of society, would potentially have been substantial; in addition, the social status of a wife was of as much significance to a husband as the social status of a new husband was to the wife.

Concerns over children might also be an important factor for men; just as it was for young childless widows, men too could wish for an heir and might therefore seek a new wife with whom to form a household and family. Further child-related reasons for men remarrying might be the death of a wife in childbirth or if a wife had passed away and left the husband with young children or a new-born. Richard Bruin may have had young children at the time of his first wife's death, which would

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<sup>119</sup> Hanawalt, *Wealth of Wives*, p. 104.

<sup>120</sup> LLGC/NLW, Pitchford Hall (Ottley) Papers, deed 912-913, Inquisition Post Mortem. See Chapter 4 for a discussion on Edmund Pitchford as a landlord.

<sup>121</sup> Caroline Barron and Anne Sutton, 'Introduction', in the authors (eds.), *Medieval London Widows 1300-1500* (London: Hambledon Press, 1994), p. xxxiii; Clive Burgess, "'By Quick and By Dead': Willa and Pious Provision in Late Medieval Bristol', *English Historical Review*, 102 (Oct 1987), pp. 837-858.

certainly have been an important factor in his decision to remarry. Richard may have had a son, Henry, as one Henry le Bruin appears in the records; that said, Henry could also have been a younger brother to Richard and he acted as an executor for Alice's (Richard's second wife and Edmund's widow) will.<sup>122</sup> The reasons for Alice's quick remarriage to Richard can only be speculated upon, as can Richard Bruin's reason for remarriage. Alice's status and wealth from her natal family, and that from her marriages, show that she was not involved in trade, nor did she need to continue her husband's business or a business of her own, a position which for many widows may have influenced their decision to remarry in order to maintain her status within their town.

In cases of remarriage for men and women, it can be seen that they would choose a spouse of the same or similar social status, as Rosenthal has also shown, to themselves and previous spouse.<sup>123</sup> In market towns the size of Bridgnorth, a new marriage partner would likely have been someone known to their previous spouse, but in order to maintain their social position, widows were willing to relocate (as Alice did when she moved to Chester) and even become a mother to their new husbands' children.

### **Women's status and the Westwode family.**

Maintaining social status has been shown to be a driving motive for women to remarry and be secure in the status their husband brought. However, the following case studies from Bridgnorth would suggest that society saw status above gender. To be associated with kinsmen of the highest social status could work well in a woman's favour, especially if such an association was of a higher social standing than their own natal family. Since society saw the patrilineal line as important, it was through a father

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<sup>122</sup> LLGC/NLW, Pitchford Hall (Ottley) Papers, deed 233. The relationship between Henry and Richard Bruin is not further clarified by a grant received by Richard from John de Grey, parson of the church of Astebury, and Robert de Brendon, parson of the church of St Peter, in Chester in 1374 and witnessed by the mayor of Chester. Richard Bruin received a grant for life in lands in the city and in the city liberties with the remainder of half of the property to go to Alice, Richard's wife, and following her death to Henry le Bruin, with all the other moiety set aside for Henry, LLGC/NLW, Pitchford Hall (Ottley) Papers, deed 505. There is no further indication of the relationship between these two men. However, a similar grant was given by the same parties in 1376, granted, for life, land in the city of Chester and its liberties, although here it is stated that the remainder should go to Henry le Bruin and Alice is not mentioned, LLGC/NLW, Pitchford Hall (Ottley) Papers, deed 505.

<sup>123</sup> Rosenthal, 'Fifteenth Century Widows', p. 38.

that both sons and daughters were identified, but if the natal kin of a wife or widow was of a higher status to that of her husband, her son could be referred to as 'son of' the mother rather than the father.

Examples from Bridgnorth illustrate that women could be acknowledged as holding a higher status than the men in their family and that the familial status could come from the woman. This is presented in the deeds, even when the woman herself was not an active party, either to highlight the fact that the land came from her family or simply as a reference to her relationship to the active party in the deed as a way of noting that person's status. An example of this practice from the early period of this study concerns the release of land from Reginald, son of Andrew Bolding to Richard, son of William Robert de Ludlow and his wife Sibil.<sup>124</sup> The deed concerns a piece of land lying near an orchard which Reginald inherited from his mother Seyena and for which John, the son of Petronella, paid him rent of 1d.<sup>125</sup> This one reference to John, who was not an active party in the deed but noted as the son of Petronella, suggests the status of his mother, Petronella, and her family, was greater than that of his father. The note of John's maternal relationship does not add to the transaction, but is required to acknowledge his social status and highlights the importance of his mother's family and his heritage.<sup>126</sup>

This could be seen as society regarding status over gender and is also illustrated by the example of the Westwode family, for which the Bridgnorth deeds offer an interesting case study of a family where sons were identified according to their maternal lineage. The Westwodes appear in the deeds during the early period of this study. Their status is suggested by the land and wealth they granted and released during this period. This family were of a high status in Bridgnorth and, whether acting as an active party in the deed or as witnesses, the sons of the Westwodes are addressed using their mother's name, with no reference to their father (who was deceased by the time of the transactions). William Westwode, for example, was named as grantor in the same form as unmarried daughters in two surviving deeds

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<sup>124</sup> LLGC/NLW, Pitchford Hall (Ottley) Papers, deed 70.

<sup>125</sup> LLGC/NLW, Pitchford Hall (Ottley) Papers, deed 70.

<sup>126</sup> It could be that John was a bastard and that this land was left in fee tail which is discussed further in Chapter 4.

where his social status was identified through his mother's name. The first deed, dated 1299, was a lease for twelve years for land in the 'vill of Westwode' and the following year, 1300, William granted a fee farm in Westwode where he was once again described as son of Margery Westwode.<sup>127</sup>

This example of favouring female descent suggests that Bridgnorth's society saw lineage and status as more important than gender. It is also to be noted that Margery was not addressed as a widow in these deeds or that William was named as the son of 'Margery, widow of...'. Her status was clear without the qualifier of male kin. The fact that Margery had children demonstrates that she had been married and was now widowed and most likely a wealthy dowager. To place status over gender may have been a convention common to this family, as there are other examples. For example, there is land granted by William, son of Margery Westwode, to his son John in 1300. This was witnessed by another man referred to by his mother's name, namely William, son of Hawis de Westwode, the same Hawis whose husband released a house in Westwode which had come to him through her dowry.<sup>128</sup> The persistence of using mothers as the mark of status for the family and the naming formula of offspring in deeds persisted for the transactions involving the Westwode family. The sons of Hawis and Margery witnessed a grant between Robert, son of Hamon Palmer, and John, son of John de Oldebury, where both are once again referred to using their mothers' names as William, son of Hawis de Westwode, and William, son of Margery de Westwode.

Not only the sons of the Westwode women were identified as such; their daughters-in-law were also described and identified through their mother-in-law; even when the daughter-in-law was widowed, she was not identified by her deceased husband. In 1321, for instance, a release of land in Oldebury saw Cristina, widow of

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<sup>127</sup> LLGC/NLW, Pitchford Hall (Ottley) Papers, deed 305, Margery Westwode is now widowed even though in these deeds she is simply called Margery Westwode. LLGC/NLW, Pitchford Hall (Ottley) Papers, deed 305, dated 1299, William son of Margery Westwode leasing land. LLGC/NLW, Pitchford Hall (Ottley) Papers, deed 304, dated 1300, William granting a fee farm of two pieces in Westwode. LLGC/NLW, Pitchford Hall (Ottley) Papers, deed 95, later the same year, 1300, Henry Westwode released a house in Westwode which he held as dowry from his wife, Hawis. Henry is not referred to as Margery's son and could have been another relative or this could have been a scribal decision. Unfortunately, no seals remain for these documents which might have helped to indicate a common familiarity between these members of the Westwode family.

<sup>128</sup> LLGC/NLW, Pitchford Hall (Ottley) Papers, deed 95.

William, son of Margery Westwode, described as relict of William, son of Margery Westwode.<sup>129</sup> Here it was not only the status of her husband that identified Cristina, who was described as William's widow, but that status and naming choice was determined by her husband's mother's name. This does not appear to simply reflect the convention of using the name of the surviving parent; in other instances, offspring transferring land were still identified by the names of their deceased fathers, even where the mother was still alive. In fact, within the collection of deeds from Bridgnorth, this convention is only seen in the Westwode family. It is most noticeable for Cristina, who is identified as the widow of Margery's son, but also by her mother-in-law and not simply her deceased husband. This suggests William was known in Bridgnorth as his mother's son and when Cristina was described as his widow it was natural to name him as such. It could be that these women came from families of higher status than their husbands, but when married, they were bound by the same marriage conventions which allowed their husbands to dispose of their dowry. However, in social terms, their status was still referred to in this subtle way through the deeds.

One of the leases from William de Westwode, Margery's son, also presents an interesting case where the son was identified through both his parents, but his mother was named first with no indication that she was widowed at this time. This is a lease from Margery Westwode's son to William, son of Hawis and John de Aldebury. It is the only instance where both parents are named with the wife taking priority over her husband and they were not even the active parties in the deed.<sup>130</sup> This could have been a scribal decision at the time of the deed's creation or it could imply that Hawis was from a family higher in social status than her husband and as such her lineage promoted her to principal designation.

However, the argument for the higher status individual taking precedence, as witnessed in the deeds, can be seen to operate in ways that played against the advantage of widowed mothers. If a son was his father's heir and his mother came

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<sup>129</sup> LLGC/NLW, Pitchford Hall (Ottley) Papers, deed 1380.

<sup>130</sup> LLGC/NLW, Pitchford Hall (Ottley) Papers, deed 305.



from a family of equal or lower social standing to that of her husband, then, as a widow, the mother could be more constrained by her son.

## Conclusion

The case studies and evidence from Bridgnorth are examples of how the middling sort can be identified through their customs and the ideas of status they held are reflected in their actions when seeking to strengthen it through networks or maintaining it through marriage. This chapter has sought to explore the ideas of historians such as Peter Coss and Christine Carpenter to help define how we identify the middling sort as a group in the reality of their experience and not simply through a theoretic ideal.<sup>131</sup> A key theme has been the growing networks and associations between members of the middling sort as the more networks one held, the stronger their social position. The higher an individual's social profile, the more networks they tended to maintain and the more collectives they could be included in. To offer an analogy here, if networks were threads in a piece of rope, then the more threads you had the stronger the piece of rope.

These actions not only demonstrate the effect of their pursuit of status on the development of their environment of Bridgnorth but also the evolving relationships between members of the middling sort and the lower gentry, which is a key theme throughout this thesis. While focusing on Bridgnorth, the deeds also represent the professional partnerships of the middling sort with members of the gentry, which emphasises the position on the middling sort elite's wealth as they could now move in social circles which could also incorporate the lower gentry. These commercial relationships represent the economic growth in market towns which led to the changing habits of consumers, especially, as suggested by Hatcher and Miller, 'the upper and middling ranges of English society'.<sup>132</sup>

This chapter has also examined the occupations of the middling sort, which brought about trade partnerships. The results of these partnerships on the townscape were a changing society and these changes can be plotted by the rise of the middling sort. Noticeably, deeds from early in the study period, 1280-1310, related mainly to

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<sup>131</sup> Coss, *Origins*, pp. 10-11; *Foundations of Gentry Life*; Carpenter, 'Gentry and Communities', p. 354.

<sup>132</sup> E. Hatcher and J. Miller, *Medieval England: Towns, Commerce and Crafts, 1086-1348* (London: Longman, 1995), p. 228.

the actions of the lower gentry and were focused outside the township. The later period, however, was dominated by deeds of the middling sort and focused more directly within the town. As the fourteenth century progressed, we witness the increased use of deeds in Bridgnorth and the dominance of the middling sort, which also demonstrates the increase of seal use, discussed in the following chapter.

This newly gained status was not exclusive to men, but also extended to women, for whom marriage played a key role. The case studies above show that the lineal movement of widows into a marriage of similar status was a strong factor in the choice to remarriage. Even if they had been born into a family with a strong status, once male kin of fathers and husbands passed away, their social position was not always guaranteed. However, as seen in the Westwode family, women could sometimes be identified as the higher status suggesting that it was status and not gender which was important to Bridgnorth's social hierarchy and explored further in the next chapter where women are often seen to act as executors for wills.

The definition of a fourteenth century middling sort is problematic in the sense that we are identifying a group in terms they did not recognise themselves. However, our definition does help us to establish an understanding of the identity and place of the middling sort in the developing urban society of fourteenth-century Bridgnorth. By incorporating a number of identifying factors, such as the times a person acted as a witness and bailiff, the wealth they held as seen in the subsidy, their occupation, and their personal network, we are able to form a broader image of the social structure of Bridgnorth. In the next chapter we now turn to how these individuals identified themselves.

## **CHAPTER 2: SOCIAL STATUS AND SELF-IDENTIFICATION**

### **Introduction**

The previous chapter demonstrated how we can identify the middling sort by their community and their actions when maintaining that status through networks of family, civic duties and marriage. Here, we turn to the manner in which they identified themselves and how the identity of Bridgnorth as a market town impacted on their own identity and their choices of self-identification. The location of Bridgnorth was a strong source of identification for the people of Bridgnorth, as it dictated the choice and success of a given trade based on the available resources, market access and trade routes. We examine the way in which these factors were incorporated into the self-identification of the town's people. In this chapter, the impact of their location on the middling sort is explored through the trade they employed, which brought them wealth and status. This new status is then presented in the town in terms recognisable to the gentry and by others in the locale through the images on their seals.

One of the main visible sources available for this self-identification is the use of seals, which is discussed next in the chapter. Seal usage is utilised in this chapter to identify the manner in which the rising middling sort emulated the practices of the gentry through pseudo-heraldic designs with evidence from the Pitchford family, who have already been noted in the previous chapter. The use of pseudo-heraldic designs demonstrates a bold form of self-identification of which the aim clearly was to, literally, stamp their mark of status and wealth in the records. Here we include the seals of Alice Rondulph, whose marriage and remarriage has been discussed in Chapter 1. We see how she identified herself and include a study of her father's seal and that of her two husbands.

Seals were personal items which contained many facets to a person's identity which were consciously projected. This chapter concludes with an examination of the personal items that the middling sort owned, which can shed further light on the wealth they held and how they used these items.

### **Region and trade**

The location of Bridgnorth is fundamental to the wealth of its middling sort and its success as a market town. Bridgnorth is located in the south-eastern region of

Shropshire and is crossed by a principal medieval road from London to Shrewsbury, by way of Worcester, crossing through the parish and part of the town's edge.<sup>1</sup> Bridgnorth is well suited to a study of this nature as it allows examination of the wealthy middling sort in their immediate locality without undue influence of a larger neighbouring town or city. This allows for the characteristics the middling sort displayed to be seen freely and illuminate their awareness of national trends and themes outside of Bridgnorth.

Studies by James Masschaele complement the present study by focusing upon the role of peasants, merchants and markets.<sup>2</sup> Masschaele undertook an exploration of the inter-relationship between these groups.<sup>3</sup> He suggests that towns people initially networked and rarely traded goods in loosely based rural economies prior to the period of this study. He identifies a town's progress into firmly integrated townships, such as Bridgnorth, where individuals participated in national and international trade. A focal point of the study is the rise of rural markets, leading to the creation of the towns' own commercial infrastructure and alliances. This is the nature of the establishment of Bridgnorth's commerce, administration and personal relationships within the middling sort. Masschaele notes the importance of establishing core markets in order to attract and unite merchants and traders who were otherwise removed from local economies.<sup>4</sup>

As already noted, Bridgnorth lay on a principal medieval road from London to Shrewsbury, which crossed through the parish and part of the town's edge. This section of road between Bridgnorth and Shrewsbury was of importance to the movement of goods, as it was part of a busy trade route between Bristol and Chester in c. 1360.<sup>5</sup> These trade links allowed Bridgnorth easy movement for many commodities, including wool. Bridgnorth was located in an area capable of producing this lucrative commodity. Bridgnorth's inhabitants readily engaged in the wool trade

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<sup>1</sup> B. P. Hindle, 'Road Networks of Medieval England and Wales', *Journal of Historical Geography*, 2 (1975), p. 220.

<sup>2</sup> James Masschaele, *Peasants, Merchants and Markets: Inland trade in Medieval England* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1997), p. 22.

<sup>3</sup> Masschaele, *Peasants, Merchants and Markets*, p. 22.

<sup>4</sup> Masschaele, *Peasants, Merchants and Markets*, p. 213.

<sup>5</sup> E. J. S. Parsons (ed.), *Map of Great Britain, Known as the Gough Map* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1970), p. 36.

and Shropshire and Herefordshire offered pasture for short-wool sheep breeds such as the Ryelands, known for their exceptionally fine wool, and the Lemster Ore, which provided what was known as the golden fleece of England.<sup>6</sup> The close bond between Bridgnorth and the wool trade allowed its inhabitants ready access to this commercial trade, and brought those who traded status, identity and wealth.<sup>7</sup> Indeed, Eileen Power suggested that the wool trade became the most important branch of English commerce and played a major role in the evolution of the *petite bourgeoisie*, her 'little middle class'.<sup>8</sup>

The wealth gained by Bridgnorth's middling sort through the trade of the available commodities led members of the townspeople to become prosperous and leading members of their society. This is relevant to the formation of the community under discussion, as Susan Reynolds suggested that a general overview of an urban society often contains three main classes: merchants, craftsmen and servants or employees. These all depend on a social hierarchy of political, social and economic values.<sup>9</sup> It could be suggested that merchants in urban societies acquired more wealth than most, especially in areas which relied upon trade and commerce, and that the presence of merchants therefore became a defining feature of urban society, where their very presence highlights the town's urbanisation. In addition, James Davis, in his study of market morality, notes that markets were regulated and controlled by the elites of the towns, who were for the most part themselves very active in the market, as merchants, innkeepers, and brewers.<sup>10</sup>

Bridgnorth's middling sort appeared to be merchants who bought commodities to sell, unlike industrialist merchants who dealt in raw goods and materials.<sup>11</sup> This difference allowed a merchant to circulate any commodity at a profit but not be wholly occupied with that one trade, as is evident in the trading activities of men such

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<sup>6</sup> Eileen Power, *The Wool Trade in English Medieval History: The Ford Lectures*, 3<sup>rd</sup> edn. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1965), p. 21.

<sup>7</sup> Thrupp, *The Merchant Class*.

<sup>8</sup> Power, *Wool Trade*, p. 109.

<sup>9</sup> Susan Reynolds, *An Introduction to the History of English Medieval Towns* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1977), p. 74; P. J. P. Goldberg, *Medieval England: A Social History, 1250-1550* (London: Arnold, 2004).

<sup>10</sup> James Davies, *Medieval Market Morality: Life, Law and Ethics in the English Marketplace, 1200-1500* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), p. 348.

<sup>11</sup> Rigby, *English Society*, p. 151.

as Nicholas Pitchford and William de la Hulle; however, both were especially notable for their wealth and links in the wool trade.<sup>12</sup> Bridgnorth resident Nicholas Pitchford demonstrates the wider networks that trade brought to the town's middling sort as he traded with merchants such as the Melchbourne brothers of London. These brothers' played an important role in financing Edward III by delivering 2,000 quarters of wheat and 1,000 quarters of oats, to the sum of £950, in specially outfitted ships to Berwick in 1336; they were also heavily involved in the wool trade.<sup>13</sup> We also see Reginald De Conduit, who was discussed previously when in debt to Nicholas Pitchford for a bond of wool and who served two terms as mayor of London, received an allowance grant to export wool for the port of London to the sum of £949, 16s, 4d in 1338 for his wool alone as well as being described as a vintner in London.<sup>14</sup>

Nicholas Pitchford offers an example of how far the networks of Bridgnorth's middling sort could stretch in the world of trade and finance, allowing interaction, to a greater or lesser degree, with successful merchants such as the wealthy merchant William de la Pole of Hull.<sup>15</sup> However, surviving records represent Nicholas Pitchford as a middling sort merchant from the localities who could still operate within their circles. See appendices 2, 3 and 4 for a discussion on the wealthiest merchants closest to the king and how this wool from the counties was collected by them to finance the king. It would appear that it was not just middling merchants from market towns, such as Bridgnorth, who had acquired the wealth and status to be considered middling and saw their interests stretch to cities, but it was also those from larger urban areas moving interests to the locality. An example of the latter is William de la Pole, who had an association with Pitchford. William's sister was the wife of John Peverel who inherited Pitchford Hall, Pitchford, from the kinsmen of the Bishop of Lichfield who

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<sup>12</sup> TNA Website, *Discovery*: C 131/6/27.

<sup>13</sup> Hatcher and Miller, *Medieval England: Rural Society*, p. 234. TNA Website, *Discovery*: E 122/55/5-6, 10, 22.

<sup>14</sup> Reginald de Conduit served as a Sherriff in London in 1320-1 and Mayor 1334-5 and 1335-6. Barron, *London in the Later Middle Ages*, pp. 327-329; *CCR*, VII, p. 152; *CPR*, III, p. 83.

<sup>15</sup> *CCR*, IV, p. 615; E. B. Fryde, *William de la Pole: Merchant and King's Banker* (London: Hambledon Press, 1988); Rosemary Horrox, 'The de la Poles of Hull, East Yorkshire', *Local History Series*, 38 (1983), pp. 1-47, evidence from the Merchant Staple would suggest that Nicholas was a member of the syndicate of wealthy merchants operated by William de la Pole and Reginald de Conduit on behalf of Edward III in order to utilise the finances of the merchants and the wool trade. Hatcher and Miller, *Medieval England*; T. H. Lloyd, *The English Wool Trade in the Middle Ages* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977); Peter Spufford, *Power and Profit: The Merchant in Medieval Europe* (London: Thames and Hudson, 2006).

had bought Pitchford from the Pitchford family in 1301. John Peverel left no heir and his sister, Margaret, William de la Pole's wife, inherited it. In 1358, William sold his interest in Pitchford to Sir Nicholas Burnell.<sup>16</sup>

However far the association of merchants stretched, they still benefited from the protection of a guild or company within their town while not necessarily being beholden to trade in that one commodity. An example of such was Gilbert Maghfeld of London, who specialised in importing iron and was described as a member of the Ironmongers company. Iron accounted for two thirds to three quarters of his trade in the early 1390s; the remainder of his traded goods included woad, alum, copper, lead, saffron, liquorice, silks, herring, and the export of cloth and wool.<sup>17</sup>

The diverse nature of a merchant's trading activities meant they could cross socio-economic boundaries and were found in all social contexts regardless of status, their common element being only that they had a surplus commodity to sell. Although this could apply to hucksters and those from cottage industries, it is the wealth of the successful merchant which placed him in the 'middling sort' and above. Those at the lower scale of merchants, such as hucksters, could not be classed as middling sort, as they did not develop enough wealth to place them among the ruling townsmen, which is an important element of the middling sort. They also did not meet the other criteria of the middling sort as defined in this study of appearing in witness lists and holding networks with other middling sort of twelve or more. They also needed to appear as active parties in at least ten deeds and hold twelve or more properties. The effect of this on Bridgnorth's middling sort and overall society, was an apparent social diversity within the gap between agricultural and non-agricultural occupations. This spectrum encapsulated those who rarely produced and sold goods, barely making a living with limited disposable surplus and lower social standing, all the way up to those with commercial skill, political and commercial success and who interacted with the gentry.<sup>18</sup> This aspect is also reflected in Margaret Yates's study of western Berkshire, where she notes that merchants played a key role in developing capitalism and those

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<sup>16</sup> CCR, IV, p. 615; Fryde, *William de la Pole*; Horrox, 'The de la Poles of Hull'.

<sup>17</sup> Rigby, *English Society*, p. 151.

<sup>18</sup> Coss, *The Foundations of Gentry Life*, p. 257; Christopher Dyer, *An Age of Transition? Economy and Society in England in the Later Middle Ages* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005).

within her study fell into two main categories, wool merchants and cloth merchants, with members of these groups being seen as the wealthiest men in the region.<sup>19</sup> In this respect it is also worth noting here that, as Richard Britnell's discussion of the cloth trade and its significance for a towns' development illustrates, how small towns might develop in this period, growing from a modest size c. 1300 in a period of expansion into the late fourteenth century.<sup>20</sup> Britnell associated this process of urban growth with the manufacture and marketing of cloth. This urban development can be seen at Bridgnorth through the same period of the fourteenth century. It is also in accord with Britnell's argument, as shown in the evidence of Bridgnorth merchants trading internationally as discussed in appendix 5 in relation to the seizure of Nicholas Pitchford's wool in Bruges, in that urban growth was a product not solely of the interaction between town and surrounding countryside but of long-distance international travel.

As Bridgnorth's trade developed through the rise of commerce in the fourteenth century, the urbanisation and development of tenements encouraged a property market which attracted investment and the use of, amongst other things, merchant and non-merchant capital.<sup>21</sup> The land market of the local community could include anyone who held land that could be sold, leased or rented and who confirmed such transactions with written charters. In this, the middling sort physically rooted themselves in the workings of the town and identified themselves through both property and the use of physical deeds over verbal contracts, although verbal contracts continued to be in use. The manner in which the middling sort chose to identify themselves in the deeds can of course be seen through their use of seals. Frederick Tout noted that 'every person of property or official position, down to the humblest, ultimately felt bound to provide himself with a seal'.<sup>22</sup> This not only demonstrates the rise of seal usage by the middling sort, a development consistent with adoption of seal practice more generally, but that the prosperity of the property

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<sup>19</sup> Yates, *Town and Countryside*, p. 197.

<sup>20</sup> Britnell, *Commercialisation of English Society*.

<sup>21</sup> See Chapter 4.

<sup>22</sup> T. F. Tout, *Chapters in Medieval Administrative History* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1920), pp. i, 123.



market meant it could be accessed by any member of the town's social spectrum. This is emphasised by the rise in the use of written documents that would require a seal.

What is evident from the growing formality of the middling sorts transactions is the evidence they left behind regarding their involvement in the growth of commerce and wealth in their town, which can be demonstrated through the civic duties they undertook and the social collectives which emerged. The wealth of Bridgnorth can, to some degree, be attributed to the success of the middling sort and in particular those who traded and became wholesale merchants. However, it was not wholly through their own efforts that the middling sort's trade prospered, as heavy legislation on the wool trade, one of Bridgnorth's most lucrative trades, was a major contributing factor.

The *Statute Merchant*, which related to the wool trade, was introduced as a means to establish the role of a merchant, stating that knights and gentry, who had previously traded as merchants, were prevented from doing so between 1311-1322, a period in which we see growth of the middling sort in the records.<sup>23</sup> How closely this was adhered to can be debated and is difficult to quantify through the available records, as some knights, to suit their commercial purpose, used their titles interchangeably with that of "merchant". However, the Statute presented opportunities for a middling sort merchant to prosper.

Peter Coss and Pamela Nightingale have both presented a valuable insight into the wool trade in the south-west of England, where London did not dominate. Nightingale suggested that an 'advancing monopoly among merchants was becoming marked' and the economy had changed by 1322, when knights were allowed to register once more.<sup>24</sup> During the time of the gentry's absence, merchants had come to dominate the trade, leaving the gentry to play a smaller role when they could once more register.<sup>25</sup> Changes to trade regulations, following the Statute, left merchants in control of trade and staple regulations, which gave them a legal advantage in trading negotiations as well as the protection they received from the King due to his need for

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<sup>23</sup> Coss, *Foundations of Gentry Life*, p. 265.

<sup>24</sup> Pamela Nightingale, 'Knights and Merchants: Trade, Politics and the Gentry in Late Medieval England', *Past and Present*, 169 (Nov 2000), pp. 36-62.

<sup>25</sup> Nightingale, 'Knights and Merchants,' p. 41.

their financing.<sup>26</sup> Knights and the gentry may have been unwilling to be continually excluded by the *Statute Merchant* and, as previously suggested, would use the title of merchant in order to continue trading. This means that in records and trading negotiations, they placed themselves among the middling sort merchants, despite holding a different social status. It was these new trading relationships which became one factor in the merging of the middling sort and the gentry as it provided another way to ensure the gentry's social position amid the rising wealth and position of the middling sort and vice versa.

The benefit of this to the study of Bridgnorth's social networks is that this small market town's deeds reveal the networks of those who were part of the middling sort and considered socially mobile. Many of the middling sort interacted with the lower gentry of Bridgnorth's environs who they now equalled in terms of wealth and whose practices and customs they adopted, as discussed throughout this study.<sup>27</sup>

### **Combining old and new: Gentry and middling sort.**

As already discussed above, an identifiable cohort of the middling sort came from the merchant class. Where merchants appeared prominently in towns, they were noted by their generous charity, patronage and religious observance, an outward display of their identity as wealthy middling sort. These displays have been studied by Jenny Kermode in her studies of merchants from York, Beverly and Hull in the late Middle Ages. Kermode suggested that donations by wealthy members of society may indicate their desire to lead by example and to combine spiritual expressions with fulfilling a wider social purpose.<sup>28</sup>

The status of the leading members of the community and the hereditary status of the gentry in Bridgnorth can be further identified through the merging of the gentry with middling sort families. The lack of a coat of arms or hereditary title was countered by the middling sort, and as wealthy men they had the means to do adopt their own coat of arms and the manner of this is discussed here. First, we examine what is meant by gentry in terms of Bridgnorth's society and their relationship with

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<sup>26</sup> Lloyd, *English Wool Trade*, pp. 115-6.

<sup>27</sup> Hatcher and Miller, *Medieval England: Rural Society*.

<sup>28</sup> Kermode, 'Sentiment and Survival', p. 13; Kermode, 'The Merchants of Three Northern English Towns', pp. 7-38.

the middling sort. S. H. Rigby suggests that this can be seen through transformation to a traditional theory of class or 'estate' through the merging of the status of gentry and merchant.<sup>29</sup> Despite similarities to the gentry in terms of wealth, Nicholas Pitchford, for example, used no title other than 'merchant', although there is evidence that he may have descended from a cadet branch of the knightly Pitchford family and held status in local and crown affairs.<sup>30</sup>

Peter Coss notes, in his study on the foundations of gentry life, that the merging relationship between the middling sort and the gentry, can also be seen as a relationship between town and country.<sup>31</sup> Coss identifies this as an area requiring further expansion in gentry studies and considers it vital to enhance our understanding of the emergence of commerce and the middling sort within this context. A further study of note is that by Clive Holmes and Felicity Heal, who wrote of the ambiguities when studying the relationships between gentry, merchants and urban elites within a township.<sup>32</sup> Their study focuses on the actions of the lower gentry in Bridgnorth, who are seen to engage in the rising commerce just as the townspeople did through rents, tolls, markets and the trade of their commodities. Holmes and Heal discuss 'alternative incomes' from trade, church, office holding, leasing property and agriculture in order to demonstrate the many areas and networks in which an income could be gained by the lower gentry.<sup>33</sup>

It can be seen in these studies that it was the pursuit of the same cultural environment that brought about a natural merger between the middling sort and the lower gentry. An example of this is the involvement of the lower gentry in the property market of the town while maintaining their interests in their own lineage.

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<sup>29</sup> Rigby, *English Society*, p. 193.

<sup>30</sup> Fletcher and Augden, *Shropshire Lay Subsidy Roll*. Nicholas could have had links with the knightly Pitchford family from the previous century and Philippa Madden, in her study of social mobility, commented that a cadet branch from a prosperous family could advance and survive to better fortunes than the original family. Philippa C. Madden, 'Social Mobility', in Rosemary Horrox and W. Ormrod (eds.), *A Social History of England 1200-1500* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), pp. 113-134. Madden cites two cases of the cadet branch of a family prospering, the Vavsours of Yorkshire, who were established as a provincial knightly family before the fourteenth century and continued until 1524, and the Swillingtons, of whom Hugh Swillington became wealthy through marriage. When the main branch declined, it was through Hugh's grandson that the cadet branch prospered.

<sup>31</sup> Coss, *Foundations of Gentry Life*, p. 257. See also Appendix 2.

<sup>32</sup> Clive Holmes and Felicity Heal, *The Gentry in England and Wales, 1500-1700* (London: Palgrave, 1994).

<sup>33</sup> Holmes and Heal, *Gentry in England and Wales*, p. 120.

The two groups shared and displayed concern for their past, which was matched in society by the concern for their future, demonstrated by religious concerns and practices seen in testamentary evidence from Bridgnorth in Chapter 3. Coss suggests, however, that despite these two groups pursuing the same actions, it was actually the gentry who led whilst the middling sort emulated them and eventually adopted these practices as their own.<sup>34</sup>

It was above all else the wealth of the middling sort which enabled them to emulate the gentry and display their social status and identity. These actions can best be seen by Nicholas Pitchford, who made his social status in Bridgnorth known and recorded it with the use of an illuminated letter on a deed granting Masses. This deed contains the only illuminated letter in the deed collection, despite the existence of other deeds similar in content. In 1333, Nicholas and Johanna, his wife, received a licence allowing Mass to be celebrated for them by the Franciscan Friars in Bridgnorth, an order popular for merchant endowments in the fourteenth century.<sup>35</sup> This deed demonstrates Nicholas as a man of wealth not only due to the content of Masses granted but the use of the illuminated letter on the deed, no doubt commissioned at some expense by himself.<sup>36</sup> The licence was granted by Roger de Denemedede, Minister of the Franciscans in England to the Franciscans of Bridgnorth and is strikingly different to the majority of deeds in this collection.<sup>37</sup>

The deed and its contents were most likely a demonstration of wealth and social position, as the document gives a lasting impression of Nicholas's wealth, reflecting his pious patronage through the illuminated letter depicting Saint John as an eagle, as well as the pious purpose of the grant. Nicholas and Johanna extended the use of the chantry with two Masses said by the Franciscan Friars of Bridgnorth in 1337, reinforcing their first licence. Following their deaths, the executors of Nicholas' and Johanna's wills were instructed to pay for additional Masses for them and their family,

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<sup>34</sup> Coss, *Foundations of Gentry Life*, p. 276.

<sup>35</sup> See Chapter 3 for further discussion on this.

<sup>36</sup> LLGC/NLW, Pitchford Hall (Ottley) Papers, deed 1057.

<sup>37</sup> LLGC/NLW, Pitchford Hall (Ottley) Papers, deed 1057. The seals of the Franciscan friars and this deed have been discussed by Elizabeth New, 'Ecclesiastical Seals', in Elizabeth New, Phillipp Schofield, Susan Johns, and John McEwan (eds.), *Seals and Society: Medieval Wales and their Border Region* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2016), pp. 61-79.

as was customary, thus continuing their public identity as wealthy citizens even after their deaths.<sup>38</sup>

### **Use of seals by the middling sort**

Further examples of the manner in which the middling sort both defined themselves and tended to emulate the gentry, creating this fluid relationship which helped to define the middling sort and can be found in their use of seals. Moving on from Nicholas Pitchford's use of an illuminated letter when requesting Masses, we remain focused on the Pitchford family as the main point of reference for a discussion of self-identity by the middling sort through their choice of seal designs. In this respect, the choice of seal design or motif by Edmund, Nicholas Pitchford's son, is instructive. From c. 1344 to his last surviving deed, dated 1353, Edmund's choice of seal consisted of a pseudo-heraldic motif which included his initials.<sup>39</sup> Although Edmund is the most visible in the deeds of all Nicholas Pitchford's sons, evidence shows two of his brothers, Robert and William, sealed with similar 'pseudo-heraldic' motifs which also incorporated their initials on deeds dating from 1343.<sup>40</sup> Although, evidence from the records appears to show that only one of Nicholas Pitchford's sons followed their father into the wool trade, this does not prove that the others did not also trade in wool or other commodities. Records of wool allowances granted to merchants for the Port of London in 1343 would suggest that Nicholas Jr. was a merchant who dealt with vast quantities of wool like his father.<sup>41</sup> However, although he continued to transport great quantities, the amount he held in the years following his father's death was significantly less.

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<sup>38</sup> See Chapter 3 for discussion of this practice.

<sup>39</sup> LLGC/NLW, Pitchford Hall (Ottley) Papers, deed 333, dated 1344, seal of Edmund de Pitchford: Rounded Oval, 21x19mm, uncoloured wax, on tag. Motif: Within an ornate quartrafoil, a shield charged with a merchant mark or pseudo-armorial device (tierced in pairle reversed, in dexter chief letter 'E', in sinister chief letter 'P', in base a cinquefoil pierced) surmounted by a cross. Legend: \*S'ED\*M\*VDI\*\*[...] \*{\*}\*FOR\*D\* (\*stands for ring). Motif also appears on deeds 332, 375, 1310, 1311, 1322. Elizabeth New, 'Seals as Expressions of Identity' in Phillipp Schofield, Susan Johns, Elizabeth New and John McEwan (eds.), *Seals in Context: Medieval Wales and the Welsh Marches and their Border Region* (Aberystwyth: Cambrian Press, 2012), pp. 94, 105-119.

<sup>40</sup> LLGC/NLW, Pitchford Hall (Ottley) Papers, deed 61, dated 1345, William Pitchford's seal impression. Deed 375, dated 1347, Edmund Pitchford's seal impression. Deed 15, dated 1343, Robert Pitchford's seal impression. Deed 495, dated 1347, William Pitchford described as a potter.

<sup>41</sup> CCR, VII, p. 153; CCR, VIII; LLGC/NLW, Pitchford Hall (Ottley); *CLP vol 8, 1348-1350*. p. 175. Evidence of Edmund Pitchford acting in civic role as oyer and terminer.

Edmund Pitchford married Alice Rondulph in 1344, as previously discussed, and although her family origins are not clear, evidence from her father's seal suggests gentry origins.<sup>42</sup> John Rondulph, Alice's father, used a seal which appears to bear "correct" armorial bearings which could indicate that they did hold armigerous heritage.<sup>43</sup> This marriage reflects the suggestion from Jenny Kermode's evidence of merchants in York, Beverly and Hull in the late Middle Ages, that economic unions were also accompanied with office holding and that intermarriage within the urban governing class further enhanced their elite solidarity.<sup>44</sup>

It has also been noted that as 'the possession of a title marked the major from minor nobility, so the possession of a coat of arms marked off both from merchants'.<sup>45</sup> We can see wealthy merchants adopting the trend of pseudo-heraldic motifs in order to visually bridge this gap. The expansion of seal usage coincided with the use of coats of arms, which appeared in the later Middle Ages on seals such as those used by the Pitchford brothers. It could be considered that these arms did not derive from gentry families but from the wealthy middling sort and thus held humbler origins. Research from Bridgnorth shows an increase in heraldic devices on seals in the first half of the fourteenth century with armorial and pseudo-heraldic motifs becoming more prevalent. The implication of this for Edmund's choice of seal and those of his brothers is that it was not merely social aspirations influencing their choice but also the employment of popular ideas and themes, showing their awareness of trends outside of their own locality.<sup>46</sup>

Edmund and his brothers, William and Robert, used the pseudo-heraldic motifs to incorporate their initials with a merchant mark device. Elizabeth New notes that the extensive use of the merchant mark device in later medieval urban areas could have contributed to the growing sense of communal identity among merchants,

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<sup>42</sup> See Chapter 4 for a discussion on women's testamentary evidence.

<sup>43</sup> New, 'Seals as Expression of Identity', p. 109.

<sup>44</sup> Jenny Kermode, *Medieval Merchants: York, Beverley and Hull in the Late Middle Ages* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), pp. 80-1.

<sup>45</sup> Rigby, *English Society*, p. 192.

<sup>46</sup> P. D. A. Harvey and Andrew McGuinness, *A Guide to British Medieval Seals* (London: British Library Press, 1996).

wealthier craftsmen and possibly the citizens themselves.<sup>47</sup> The pseudo-heraldic motif of the Pitchford brothers bears a cross-tipped staff projecting from a shield, which was a motif used in 1340s Shropshire, emphasising trends which members of society appear to have employed irrespective of geographic location.<sup>48</sup> New also notes that evidence from the *Seals in Medieval Wales* database revealed that in twenty-one of the fifty-three examples, a merchant mark appeared on a shield in a manner suggesting a heraldic device.<sup>49</sup> An interesting observation from Newcastle Upon Tyne and Durham is that merchant mark seals belonged to men styled *burgensis*, Burgess, although there was no other evidence of their occupation as a merchant.<sup>50</sup> Further analysis of this phenomenon by Andrew McGuinness revealed that fifty percent of merchant mark seals in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries were used by men called ‘burgesses’ or ‘merchant’, implying that one in every two merchants or burgesses used a mark on their seal in much the same way merchants used the mark in the thirteenth century.<sup>51</sup> It is also of note here that Edmund and his brothers Robert and William are not referred to as merchants, with William once described as a potter in the deeds.<sup>52</sup> William Pitchford is once described as a potter in the deeds and his seal impression, containing a “pseudo-heraldic” motif similar to his Brother Edmund’s, would suggest he felt his status in the town to be as high as Edmund’s.<sup>53</sup> Although there is limited information regarding William’s property transactions, insight into his wealth is provided by his Inquisition Post Mortem. This document identified a messuage and a virgate of land that was worth 40d. yearly at the time of the inquest. Although this was a substantial amount, it does appear to have fallen in value due to

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<sup>47</sup> New, ‘Seals as Expressions of Identity’, p. 109.

<sup>48</sup> Portable Antiquities Scheme of Shropshire, *Seal Matrix* <<https://finds.org.uk/database/artefacts/record/id/480917>> (accessed 09/09/2019).

<sup>49</sup> New, ‘Seals as Expressions of Identity’, p. 109.

<sup>50</sup> Harvey and McGuinness, *Guide to Seals*, p. 172.

<sup>51</sup> Harvey and McGuinness, *Guide to Seals*, p. 172.

<sup>52</sup> LLGC/NLW, Pitchford Hall (Ottley) Papers, deed 61, dated 1345. Deed 375, dated 1347, Edmund Pitchford. Deed 15, dated 1343, Robert Pitchford. Deed 495, dated 1347, William Pitchford described as a potter.

<sup>53</sup> LLGC/NLW, Pitchford Hall (Ottley) Papers, deed 495, William Pitchford referred to as a potter. LLGC/NLW, Pitchford Hall (Ottley) Papers, deed 61, a grant of land to his brother Edmund Pitchford, attached to this deed is William’s seal; deed 375, Edmund’s seal, grant to Richard de Mughale and John de Longe (later executors of Edmund’s mother, Johanna’s, will), witnessed by Edmund’s father-in-law, John Rondulph. Both seal impressions display pseudo-armorial design and the merchant mark of the cross. This is discussed in more detail in Chapter 2.

the 'present pestilence'. Upon his death, he left a wife, Joan, and a six-year-old daughter, Alice.<sup>54</sup>

As demonstrated by Edmund and his brother's seals, the possession of a merchant mark during the fourteenth century did not necessarily indicate that the owner was a merchant. Despite never being identified as such in the deeds, Edmund did involve himself in the property market and as a man of business in the town, he would likely have traded as a merchant at some point.<sup>55</sup> Edmund's father, Nicholas Pitchford, was his link with the merchant heritage of the town and Nicholas may have chosen a merchant's mark when marking his goods and employed this own personal mark, but no firm evidence of Nicholas Pitchford's seal has been found to confirm this. P. D. A. Harvey suggested that a personal mark from one generation, with the right turn of fortunes, became the coat of arms for the next, something that may have occurred in the case of the Pitchford family.<sup>56</sup>

### **Alice Rondulph's seals**

How the Bridgnorth middling sort chose to identify themselves was dependent on a number of factors, such as wealth and civic duties, as previously discussed, but it would typically begin with one's family. Family immediately placed one in the social order and whereas men could achieve a higher social status as their wealth increased, a woman was very much dependent on her male kin for status, despite her own changing roles during her life cycle. It is with this in mind that we look at the seals used by Alice Rondulph in relation to her changing marital situation. First, however, we consider why wives chose the identity they did and the social status it may have entailed for them.

A woman's individual circumstances, social status, wealth, fertility, children, politics, and social and family pressures would have all been factors in her identity. An

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<sup>54</sup> LLGC/NLW, Pitchford Hall (Ottley) Papers, deed 495, dated 1344, William Pitchford called a 'potter'. *Calendar of Inquisitions Post Mortem and Other Analogous Documents, Preserved in the Public Record office* (hereafter CIPM) (London: The Hereford Times, 1916), IX: *Edward III*, no. 324, p. 279, dated 1349, referred to the effect of pestilence and falls in the same years his brother, Nicholas, traded in lesser quantities of wool than their father and his own trading transactions earlier in the decade in 1343.

<sup>55</sup> See Chapter 4 for Edmund Pitchford's property transactions and a full discussion thereof.

<sup>56</sup> P. D. A. Harvey, 'Personal Seals in Thirteenth Century England', in Jan Wood and G. A. Loud (eds.), *Church and Chronicle in the Middle Ages: Essays Presented to John Taylor* (London: Hambledon, 1991), p. 127.



individual's experience would emphasise more or less of these. If a woman became a widow, her experience would also dictate the outcome of her choice to remain a widow or to remarry and therefore, resulted in the identity she chose for this new phase of her life cycle, to continue in widowhood or to become a wife once more. This new identity could incorporate her familial kin but she could also choose to highlight the connections to her deceased husband's family; the choice could also depend on which identity was associated with the higher social status or it could be a mixture of the two.

Reasons for a widow to choose any of these elements reflect the fact that marriage and remarriage would alter her identity, as remarriage meant she would once again be identified as the "wife of", changing her expected form of address within her society, something over which she had no control. Whereas a woman's identity thus changed upon (re)marriage, that of her new husband did not, as he would continue to be addressed by his own name. Susan Johns noted that this altered state of address for women but not men suggests that we must see the identity of a wife as a gendered category of identity in the framework of a sociocultural context.<sup>57</sup> Despite the apparent obvious nature of this altered state of address for women, the fact that it does not apply to men of the same society and social status raises the question of whether the role of a wife was a subservient position within the family unit. This subservient position may have been one to which a widow may not have wished to return, despite her potential for a higher status alongside her husband in the wider social framework.

Yet, this one identity of 'widow' needs to be compared to the status a woman's new family and husband could bring her within her wider society. The benefits of marriage and of her wider social position were two issues which would have been addressed before a woman would have chosen marriage and would most certainly have been of importance if she remarried. Any status a woman enjoyed while widowed would be lost once she remarried and was "consumed" by her husband's identity once more.

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<sup>57</sup> Susan M. Johns, *Noblewomen, Aristocracy and Power in the Twelfth Century Anglo-Norman Realm* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2003), p. 122.

When first marrying, a woman adopted an identity moulded by a new surname and family, which included new primary obligations, as well as a new male head of household, exchanging a father for a husband. She may have chosen to continue to portray elements of this identity in her widowhood and possibly carry them into her next marriage. Away from social pressures and expectations, it has been argued that only as a widow did women gain independence as regards their property and life choices. One such choice would be the extent to which she chose to maintain the ties to a first marriage and marital kin and to assess if they were beneficial to her.<sup>58</sup>

Study of a woman's identity in remarriage is hampered by naming practices of the time, as women were mainly identified in the sources by their Christian name in association with their spouse, resulting in their premarital identity being lost in the deeds. These obstacles in the identification of women are in themselves a reflection of the laws which regulated women and property by default, placing a wife's property at her husband's disposal.

It has been noted by historians, such as Caroline Barron and Barbara Hanawalt, that women were often featured in deeds when acting as a conduit for land, whether directly or indirectly.<sup>59</sup> This connection between marriage and hereditary land has been demonstrated in studies such as those by Nigel Saul on the Sussex families of Etchingham, Sackville, and Waleys and by Christine Carpenter on Warwickshire's landed community where they each examine the exploitation of estates with regards social and political networks.<sup>60</sup> These studies illuminate the lands and political connections that could be acquired through marriage and which a widow might lose if she became a wife once more, thereby removing one element of her identity as a land owner.

With such issues in mind, we can now turn to examine the marital 'career' of Alice Rondulph, beginning with her marriage to Edmund Pitchford, which has been referred to throughout this study. Our current discussion of Alice Rondulph is an

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<sup>58</sup> Johns, *Noblewomen*, p. 122.

<sup>59</sup> Barron, *London in the Later Middle Ages*; Barbara Hanawalt, *Wealth of Wives*, p. 106

<sup>60</sup> Nigel Saul, *Scenes from Provincial Life: Knightly Families in Sussex* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986); Christine Carpenter, *Locality and Polity: A Study of Warwickshire Landed Society, 1401-1499* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992).

example of how wives chose their identity and presented it, as seen through the evidence from the Bridgnorth deeds. We can also note the work of various historians, including Amanda Vickery, Dror Wahrman, Sara Mendelson and Patricia Crawford, who used case studies covering a range of sources to demonstrate the possibilities for women.<sup>61</sup> Following her first husband Edmund's death in 1354, Alice married Richard Bruin, citizen of Chester, and relocated there.<sup>62</sup> Little information is available about the origins of Alice's natal family, but the examination of the seal of her father, John Rondulph, as discussed below, strongly suggests gentry status and that John Rondulph only had two children, Alice and her sister Agnes. Agnes did not marry, nor does she appear in the records as frequently as Alice, who is mostly visible when acting as an executrix for Edmund's will.

Deeds relating to Alice Rondulph in Chester only name her as Alice Bruin, following her remarriage to Richard Bruin and do not refer to the fact that she was the widow of Edmund Pitchford. However, there is evidence that Edmund Pitchford's widow from Bridgnorth was the same as Alice Bruin from Chester. Alice granted land in the *vill* of Bridgnorth with her husband, Richard Bruin, in a deed witnessed by John Collyng, whose will is discussed in Chapter 3, and Nicholas Pitchford, probably Edmund's brother or nephew, in 1370.<sup>63</sup> Furthermore, impressions of the seals used for confirming this grant are attached to the deed and in this instance; Alice used Edmund's seal, bearing a pseudo-heraldic motif with his initials, despite having acquired a seal of her own by this date.<sup>64</sup> Alice's choice of seal for this grant may be related to the land she was granting and its location in Bridgnorth, which could have had connections to Edmund. The land in question was located in Tasley, in the manor of Astley Abbots, and appears to be that which Alice's father, John, granted to her and Edmund prior to their marriage in 1341, discussed further in Chapter 4.<sup>65</sup>

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<sup>61</sup> Dror Wahrman, *The Making of the Modern Self: Identity and Culture in Eighteenth Century England* (London University Press: London, 2006); Amanda Vickery, *Gender, Taste and Material Culture in Britain and North America, 1700-1830* (London: London University Press, 2006); Sara Mendelson and Patricia Crawford (eds.), *Women in Early Modern England 1550-1720* (Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1998), p. 9. Their work is discussed further in Tim Reinke-Williams, *Women, Work and Sociability in Early Modern London* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014).

<sup>62</sup> LLGC/NLW, Pitchford Hall (Ottley) Papers, deed 391, evidence of Alice now living in Chester.

<sup>63</sup> LLGC/NLW, Pitchford Hall (Ottley) Papers, deed 1310.

<sup>64</sup> LLGC/NLW, Pitchford Hall (Ottley) Papers, deed 1310.

<sup>65</sup> LLGC/NLW, Pitchford Hall (Ottley) Papers, deed 57.

Nonetheless, it reveals that Alice did retain at least one of Edmund's seals and used it in conjunction with her second husband, despite already possessing her own seal.<sup>66</sup>

This piece of evidence confirms that, regardless of other records naming Alice as 'Bruin' and not as 'Pitchford', she is Edmund's widow. This seal, in so naming her, provides an invaluable piece of evidence which, when followed through the deeds, leads us to a better understanding of Alice's personal wishes, as well as displaying the personal ideas of the woman who owned it, which is explored fully in the next chapter.<sup>67</sup>

Alice and Edmund married in 1340/1, when she is first seen in a surviving deed.<sup>68</sup> Alice was only identified as a seal user when widowed in 1355-1356.<sup>69</sup> In these grants Alice used her own seal, bearing a standing female figure holding a shield, which she first used soon after Edmund's death in 1356.<sup>70</sup> Four impressions of this seal have been identified, dating between 1356 and 1360 and this one small seal suggests the identity Alice most strongly felt, that of her natal family, and wished to portray within her community through the image on the seal.

Elizabeth Danbury noted that it was not uncommon for aristocratic women to choose a standing female figure with an armorial design, such as that chosen by Alice, and aristocratic women of the late thirteenth and early fourteenth centuries often chose their image with a shield of arms on a versica, or pointed oval, seal.<sup>71</sup> Seals of noblewomen have included this standing female figure with the incorporation of heraldic arms, which were then adopted by the landholding elites in the twelfth century, in order to highlight their lineage and status. Alice was not of the higher nobility and her seal was attached to a document dated 1356, which is quite late since this style was popular with the seals of elite ladies up to the early fourteenth century, after which it began to decline.<sup>72</sup> Alice's seal is a rather small rounded oval where the dominant feature of the image was a shield, held aloft by a standing female figure.

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<sup>66</sup> LLGC/NLW, Pitchford Hall (Ottley) Papers, deed 476.

<sup>67</sup> LLGC/NLW, Pitchford Hall (Ottley) Papers, deed 322.

<sup>68</sup> LLGC/NLW, Pitchford Hall (Ottley) Papers, deed 38.

<sup>69</sup> LLGC/NLW, Pitchford Hall (Ottley) Papers, deed 38.

<sup>70</sup> LLGC/NLW, Pitchford Hall (Ottley) Papers, deeds 38, 46, and 1293.

<sup>71</sup> Elizabeth Danbury, 'Queens and Powerful Women: Image and Authority', in Noel Adams, John Cherry and James Robinson (eds.), *Good Impressions: Image and Authority in Medieval Seals* (London: The British Museum, 2008), pp. 17-25; Johns, *Noblewomen*, pp. 122-152.

<sup>72</sup> Danbury, 'Queens and Powerful Women', p. 20.

Four impressions of this seal have been identified, dating between 1356 and 1360, and this one small seal suggests the identity Alice wished to portray within her community. It can be proposed that, despite having a small seal, Alice was establishing herself by asserting some form of status in her community through a reflection of the seals of earlier elite women.

Susan Johns' research on seals and sealing practices of noble women has drawn similar conclusions and these also have relevance for the case of Alice Rondulph. Johns explains how the seal motif can illustrate the way a woman could construct her identity within the framework of her society.<sup>73</sup> In an observation of wealthy widows, Johns noted that this status, and that of the heiress, can provide a context which granted a woman power in the Middle Ages. In the case of Alice Rondulph, it was the choice of seals she employed in the different stages of her life, with evidence of her sealing independently as a widow, which display her strongest identity. It was the seals Alice chose which reveal the message of the status she believed she held and her place in the social hierarchy. A women's participation in business and legal matters was impacted by her life cycle and this is evident for both wives and widow sigillants when identified through their marital status and familial connections.

The fact some wives had their own seal suggests they held their own identity alongside that of their identity as a wife. However, caution is required to believe this assumption was the case for all women. Alice's identity, which she portrayed on her seal, was a fixed identity she constructed for herself following Edmund's death and, despite remarrying, she maintained one seal of her first husband alongside that of her new identity as Richard Bruin's wife. Alice's choice of seal when sealing alongside her second husband and clearly still acting as Edmund's executrix raises further questions regarding the sealing practices of women. Alice had the choice of seals to use and on the occasion of granting land during her second marriage, she chose Edmund's seal, not her own, not her new husband's. This suggests that the sealing practices for women of Alice's status were not prescribed by certain ideals or pressures, as she

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<sup>73</sup> Susan M. Johns, 'Seals, Women, Gender and Identity', in Elizabeth A. New, Phillipp R. Schofield, S. Johns, and J. McEwan (eds.), *Seals and Society: Medieval Wales and their Border Region* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2016), p. 92.

sealed independently of her husband. Richard Bruin did not appear on grants for the execution of Edmund's will other than this one, outlining land in Tasely. Alice chose Edmund's seal for this land grant and did so independently. This suggests it was not only the role of executrix which allowed a woman to operate independently under her legal duty, but that she could also act independently in social politics through visual means. With regards to Alice's previous identity as the wife of Edmund Pitchford, it could be for this reason she chose Edmund's seal, as she was carrying out his wishes when acting as an executrix. In this situation, it might be said that Alice felt a duty to Edmund and the role of executrix but still preserved elements of her own identity.

The case of Alice Rondulph is not only important for the evidence it provides of her pre-marital identity and her second marriage, but also because it shows that she maintained her own identity. It could be argued that her position as a middling sort woman and not a member of the gentry, despite family ties, gave her the freedom to behave in a way that gentlewomen could not as they were bound by a more rigid hierarchy under their husbands. The number of wives whose premarital identity cannot be determined reinforces the idea that they lost some sense of identity upon marriage. Interestingly, in this respect, Peter Coss has observed that when wives of knights sealed charters, they often used seals with the husbands' arms and, unlike Alice, did so with no reference to their natal family.<sup>74</sup> Edmund created his own arms, in a fashion, which Alice could have used, but the fact she did not and instead only displayed her family connections, demonstrates the full sense of identity that Alice held for herself and her heritage. The lineage of the Rondulph family is discussed further in appendix 8.

### **John Rondulph's seal**

Alice's choice of motif raises interesting questions about the strength of her natal identity, since she chose to emphasise it once widowed and when no longer under coverture of her husband. Her bond to the identity and status of her family are evident through initial observations of the seals used by her father, John Rondulph. John Rondulph used two seal matrices, the first with an image of two heads facing one another beneath a stylised lily, a "love and loyalty" motif which became popular

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<sup>74</sup> Peter Coss, *The Lady in Medieval England 1000-1500* (Wiltshire: Sutton Publishing, 1998), p. 47.

during the fourteenth century.<sup>75</sup> The engraved legend was 'anonymous' and the motto 'love me and you' can often be found with this motif, which John employed between 1341 and 1349.<sup>76</sup> In 1349, he started using a seal depicting St Katherine, a saint identified by the wheel she held, a symbol of her martyrdom, and an image popular in the fourteenth century. The seal depicts St Katherine holding aloft two shields and impressions from this seal were attached to three transactions in 1350.<sup>77</sup> The dexter seal has a barry of three, but it is difficult, on the identified impressions, to determine the markings on the other shield with any certainty.<sup>78</sup> The Rondulph family coat of arms cannot be identified with certainty, but does appear to hold true armorial bearings, as noted above. John did however appear to follow popular themes of armorial trends, much like Edmund Pitchford, while also incorporating an expression of piety by using the image of St Katherine.

Alice can be seen to follow the example on her father's seal, firstly by her choice of motif through the incorporation of a dominant image of a shield, thereby, displaying references to the seal used by her father which also included the dominant features of an armorial design. Although the heraldic details are unclear on the seal impressions for both Alice and her father, it can be assumed, but not stated with any certainty, that they were the markings of a Rondulph heritage. Secondly, Alice's choice of seal image of a prominent female figure and shield not only created an iconographic connection to her family but also, in the shared choice of a female figure holding a wheel (suggesting it was St Katherine), specifically to her father.<sup>79</sup> The projected image of this motif creates the idea of a lineage to Alice's family and status which she independently held in her community, beyond any she gained through

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<sup>75</sup> LLGC/NLW, Pitchford Hall (Ottley) Papers, deed 57, impression of John Rondulph's earlier seal. My thanks to Elizabeth New for translating the motto. Harvey and McGuinness, *Guide to British Seals*.

<sup>76</sup> LLGC/NLW, Pitchford Hall (Ottley) Papers, deeds 404, 57, 26, and 58, impressions of John Rondulph's earlier seal.

<sup>77</sup> LLGC/NLW, Pitchford Hall (Ottley) Papers, deeds 566, 1126, and 251, impressions of John Rondulph's seals. Katherine Lewis, *The Cult of St. Katherine of Alexandria in Late Medieval England* (London: Woodbridge, 2000); Jacqueline Jenkins and Katherine Lewis, *St. Katherine of Alexandria: Texts and Contexts in Western Medieval Europe* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2003). Further examples of the image of St Katherine used in Bridgnorth can be found in the LLGC/NLW, Pitchford Hall (Ottley) Papers, deed 1605.

<sup>78</sup> New, 'Seals as Expression of Identity', pp. 105-121. Elizabeth New suggested that the motif of John Rondulph's seals appears to have 'correct' armorial bearings. Although the origins of the family are unknown, this would suggest that the Rondulphs could have armigerous heritage.

<sup>79</sup> New, 'Seals as Expression of Identity', pp. 105-121; Johns, 'Seals, Women, Gender and Identity', pp. 91-105.

marriage. The use of a heraldic image on Alice's seal confirms her identity and status, as does the act and social function of sealing itself, much like noble women of the late thirteenth and early fourteenth centuries.<sup>80</sup>

### **Matching a seal to a transaction**

Despite owning her own seal, it was not this seal Alice chose, but Edmund's, on the occasion of granting land in Tasley, a few miles from Bridgnorth, as discussed above. Susan Johns has argued that a certain seal would be used for several deeds which all related to a common theme or the same land. She based this on her interpretation of John Rondulph's use of the "love and loyalty" seal, which he employed when granting land and property to Alice and Edmund prior to their marriage.<sup>81</sup> The seal bears an anonymous motto, 'love me and you', often found with this motif. The lack of a personal legend or markings could suggest this seal was mass produced. The use of this seal by John Rondulph, purely for grants made to Alice and Edmund prior to their marriage, included a grant in 1341 which stated that a fee farm and lands in Tasley must revert to the grantor should the grantees die without heirs.<sup>82</sup>

However, there are limited examples to suggest that the use of this seal by John Rondulph was meant to reflect the content of the deeds, as he had more than one seal, which was not uncommon.<sup>83</sup> As we have already seen, Alice used Edmund's seal on grants after remarrying. As above, the argument could be made that the choice of this seal reflected the content of the grant. There is however no consistent evidence to fully support this theory, as of the nine surviving deeds where Alice acted as executrix for Edmund, two have lost their seals, in three she used her own seal, and in another three grants she sealed alongside her second husband and used Edmund's seal.<sup>84</sup> It was only when she remarried that Alice used Edmund's seal rather than her own or permitted Richard, her second husband, to seal on her behalf. This fact alone highlights the freedom of choice she had and that she still maintained a level of

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<sup>80</sup> See Appendix 10 for further discussion on the Rondulph family lineage.

<sup>81</sup> Johns, 'Seals, Women, Gender and Identity'. See Appendix 8 for further discussion on the Rondulph family.

<sup>82</sup> LLGC/NLW, Pitchford Hall (Ottley) Papers, deed 57, John Rondulph granting land in Tasley.

<sup>83</sup> LLGC/NLW, Pitchford Hall (Ottley) Papers, deeds 56, 1126, and 251.

<sup>84</sup> LLGC/NLW, Pitchford Hall (Ottley) Papers, deed 17, dated 1356, unknown seal; deed 383, dated 1358 and deed 83, dated 1360, seal missing; deed 38, dated 1356, deed 1293, dated 1358, and deed 46, dated 1360, Alice using her own seal; deed 310, dated 1370, deed 1310, dated 1371, and deed 1311, dated 1371, Alice sealing with second husband using Edmund's seal.



independent status. The free choice of identity on this occasion reflects her role as executrix of Edmund's will. The joint sealing of a document with her second husband, Richard, was also an outward expression of Alice's combined responsibility and status within the community.

### **Richard Bruin's seal**

These discussions about an individual's identity and place in their society can be broadened to reflect the wider acceptance of their place in their community and can be examined further by close scrutiny of other images portrayed on their seals. The recurring themes of social status are reflected in an analysis of the seal of Alice's second husband, Richard Bruin, when compared to the seal Alice used once she remarried. This comparison strengthens arguments concerning a person's "group" or social status and identity. The seals used by both of Alice's husbands established their ideas of self-image within their community and placed them in the middling sort. The self-image Alice's husbands chose were of importance to her, as they would have had implications for her status as their wife. The seal motif could be used to demonstrate the social practices of market town inhabitants but, as demonstrated by Alice, the choice of seal used for particular transactions or collection of transactions could also relate to a particular identity choice and personal preference, as discussed above and noted by Susan Johns.<sup>85</sup>

When examining the seal used by Richard Bruin, the remarkable similarity of his seal to that of Edmund Pitchford's, Alice's first husband, whose seal she kept and used when remarried, should be noted for its similarity. It may not be fanciful to think that Richard chose his motif after seeing the image on Edmund's seal, a seal which, as we have seen, Alice kept. If this was the case, it must be considered that despite the social status Richard would have already enjoyed as a citizen of Chester, he still wished to illustrate this in the same way as Edmund had. The status Richard's second wife displayed on her seal may have influenced his choice of seal design and used the popular theme of a pseudo-heraldic design.<sup>86</sup>

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<sup>85</sup> Johns, 'Seals, Women, Gender and Identity', p. 92.

<sup>86</sup> New, 'Seals as Expressions of Identity', p. 109.

## **Personal items of the middling sort**

Ownership of a seal was not the only way the middling sort demonstrated their identity, status and wealth. They also did so through their personal items, which are referenced in the deeds. A document dated 1300 outlined a grant made between William, son of Margery Westwode, and his son, John.<sup>87</sup> The Westwodes were an older family in the area of Bridgnorth. They did not hold a title, but their deeds highlight some of the personal items that were of value to the elite middling sort and were available in the market place and affordable to them at this time.<sup>88</sup> The grant was for a fee farm which William had received with his wife, Sarah.<sup>89</sup> For the farm, John was to pay rents of a quarter of corn at the end of six weeks and one robe costing 8s. annually for the duration of William's life, except in the first year of the rent, when no robe was due.<sup>90</sup> The remaining rent was two pairs of stockings valued at 12 pence annually (but only one pair in the first year), four pairs of shoes costing 20 pence, and three pairs of woollen vestments costing 10 pence each. In addition to this, William requested a halfpence to be given every holiday and each Sunday towards the service at the parish of Oldbury along with the usual offering, emphasising once again the importance of spiritual patronage to the middling sort.<sup>91</sup> This demonstrates the elite middling sort owned such items and that they expected others of their status to have access to them which in turn highlights the commodities which were on sale to them in their market town.

In another example, from the late thirteenth century, a garment was required as payment by a member of the middling sort in a deed between Robert, son of Adam de Castiltona, and Robert, son of William de Ridleg. This grant was for a fee farm and twelve pieces of land and for this the rent was one pair of white gloves, annually.<sup>92</sup>

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<sup>87</sup> LLGC/NLW, Pitchford Hall (Ottley) Papers, deed 304, dated 1300, William de Westwode grants land to his son John. The description of William as the son of Margery and not his father is discussed in Appendix 11.

<sup>88</sup> For a further discussion on the status of the Westwode women, see Appendix 11.

<sup>89</sup> LLGC/NLW, Pitchford Hall (Ottley) Papers, deed 304.

<sup>90</sup> LLGC/NLW, Pitchford Hall (Ottley) Papers, deed 304.

<sup>91</sup> LLGC/NLW, Pitchford Hall (Ottley) Papers, deed 304. As it was an expected practice to give to the parish, the family may have also donated some of these items in the form of charity. An example in Chapter 3 sees William de la Hulle request for shoes to be distributed to those most in need on the day of his funeral, something that wealthy members of society would feel it their pious duty to do. LLGC/NLW, Pitchford Hall (Ottley) Papers, deed 331, will of William de la Hulle.

<sup>92</sup> LLGC/NLW, Pitchford Hall (Ottley) Papers, deed 220.

Although no value of the items was given nor any mention of the material they should be made from, it does express a preference for an item which had value enough to the middling sort for this token gesture of rent terms.

The value of these items also highlights the wealth and status of those granting them. The colour of an item would be of importance due to the sumptuary laws and expense of dyes, hence its detail in the deed. Elizabeth Ellen Psalter's study of Kent communities noted clothing was often described by colour and fabric, suggesting the social importance of this for some individuals.<sup>93</sup> The fact that colour is mentioned in the deed signifies its importance as well as specifying which item should be given to whom. Comparisons of the rents listed above to similar items left in wills in the later deeds of the mid-fourteenth century reveal the type of garments that were considered of value, even if colour was not stated. Examples from mid-fourteenth century Bridgnorth wills show a green robe left by Richard de Cagewely to William de Gugemarch and a plain robe to Nicholas Baret; Richard also left twelve cloths of finest wool to the Church of St Leonard in 1349.<sup>94</sup> And in 1377 Alice Bruin, nee Rondulph, left a red robe with hood to her maid Sibil in her will, along with a black gown and a hood *capitum de secca*. Alice's sister Agnes received a hood and a gown *gyd mixt* and John Leuay received a green gown with a scarlet hood.<sup>95</sup> This last request of a gown given to a man may seem unusual, but a gown, as stated in the deed, could mean a dress or an outfit, which highlights that it is not the item itself which was being given in this case but the value of it.<sup>96</sup>

## Conclusion

The location of Bridgnorth could be seen as one of the principal factors for the identity and wealth of the merchant activities of those in the elite of the town's middling sort. It seems reasonable to suggest that the changes in an older social structure were

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<sup>93</sup> Elizabeth Ellen Psalter, 'Some Difference in the Cultural Production of Household Consumption in Three North Kent Communities, c. 1450-1500', in Cordelia Beattie, Anna Maslakovic, and Sarah Rees Jones (eds.), *The Medieval Household in Christian Europe, c. 850- 1550: Managing Power, Wealth and the Body. International Medieval Research*, 12 (Turnhout: Brepols, 2003), p. 404; Louise Sylvester, Mark C. Chambers, and Gale R. Owen-Crocker (eds.), *Medieval Dress and Textiles in Britain: A Multilingual Sourcebook* (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 2014).

<sup>94</sup> LLGC/NLW, Pitchford Hall (Ottley) Papers, deed 1349.

<sup>95</sup> LLGC/NLW, Pitchford Hall (Ottley) Papers, deed 322.

<sup>96</sup> Gifts of gowns to women could be seen on a practical level as they can be easily adapted to fit explaining why it would be more likely to see these items given to women and not men.

brought about through the rise of commerce in the fourteenth century, resulting in a merging of the older landed gentry and the middling sort. Whether this was intentional by the gentry as a way of surviving or by the middling sort who met the gentry in terms of wealth and emulated their practices remains to be seen. These factors can be seen through the similar ideals and outlooks which brought the two groups together and resulted in their merging and similar portrayals of identity. This cemented them into a collective with shared ideals and outlook for their environment. As a result of this shared identity, the town seemed to be led by wealth. In the locality of Bridgnorth, this wealth appears to have been held by the middling sort. This highlights their outlook, which extended beyond their immediate surroundings as the result of their trading networks since those took them outside of their locality.

The middling sort were constantly fluid in their social circles but a sense of identity can be seen. The self-identity which the wealthy middling sort projected through local hierarchies presented a strengthened sense of identity and control over their environment. This is especially evident when shown through personal items such as seals which, for both men and women, reflected national trends, while demonstrating ideas of their own personal identity through the adoption of practices and influences from outside their locality. As noted in this discussion, individual practices, such as Nicholas Pitchford's illuminated letter and pious patronage, established a clearer sense of the middling sort's self-worth and the changes they felt. The conscious efforts made by the middling sort to project a certain identity of themselves through visual displays was not only confined to their life cycle, but following their death they continued to project their status in their town through the bequests left in their wills, which is discussed in the following chapter.

## CHAPTER 3: TESTAMENTARY EVIDENCE

### Introduction

Peter Heath has cautioned that ‘the historian who exploits wills must evade the dangers of being deluded on the one hand by statistics and on the other by impression’.<sup>1</sup> The sixteen identified testamentary records available from Bridgnorth are not numerous enough to allow a firm statistical analysis, but they do offer the potential for individual case studies which contribute to the overall study of the town and its inhabitants. To this end, in the current chapter, selected case studies are presented to determine similarities between the testamentary evidence of men and women of Bridgnorth. This expands our understanding of social networks in the town and brings out the personal voice of the testators, points we have begun to explore in the preceding chapter.

Previous chapters have established who Bridgnorth’s middling sort were. Here, we focus on individuals, identified as members of the middling sort in order to further determine the networks within this group and emphasise the points of previous chapters as to who the leading “community brokers” were. The people in this study can be said to hold the most wealth in the town, but within this group there was still a scale of wealth. The shared interests of this group and overlapping networks meant that within the middling sort there were varying degrees of “haves” and “have nots”, although as a group, the middling sort certainly were the “haves” compared to those below them in the social hierarchy. This is demonstrated through the similarity of ideas held by the entire middling sort of the shared values for their town. The constraints of one’s fortune determined how far they could display these ideas – and their identity – here focusing on the period following their death. The visual displays of the middling sort’s wealth following their death may have been within the bounds of their financial situation, but one thing that cannot be disputed was their emulation of gentry practices. We include the testamentary evidence of Alice Rondulph alongside

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<sup>1</sup> Peter Heath, ‘Urban Piety in the Later Middle Ages: Evidence of the Hull Wills’, in R. B. Dobson (ed.), *The Church, Politics and Patronage in the Fifteenth Century* (Gloucester: St Martin’s Press, 1984), p. 212.

testamentary evidence of men in order to establish the personal experience of Bridgnorth's middling sort by both men and women.<sup>2</sup>

Following the analysis of testamentary evidence, we focus on the networks of an individual, which have already been discussed in the previous chapter. Here we examine the networks through the recipients of bequests. Following this we then study the details of the evidence which further demonstrate the status of the middling sort through their choice of burial place, churches they donated to and the care they showed for their environment and town. After this we include a discussion of the role of executor, focusing on women in this role to question the extent to which a woman's gender impacted on her ability to fulfil this role as recognised by secular and ecclesiastic law. This also goes some way to acknowledge the relationships between husbands and wives, illustrated by the trust men had in their wives to carry out this legal role. The role of executor is important in this study, as it is one of the few ways in which women are visible in the deeds. After all, as discussed in the previous chapter, wives were often subsumed in their husbands' identity and habitually hidden in the deeds. While presenting this information it is to be noted that these were common forms of testamentary culture and the inhabitants of Bridgnorth are seen here to enforce the national trends for individuals of their status.

A study of the testamentary evidence from Bridgnorth and the commemoration practices of its townspeople would not be complete without reference to the informative work by Eamon Duffy. In *Stripping the Altar*, Duffy demonstrates that the medieval church gave colour to the townspeople through ceremonies throughout the liturgical year, which created a sense of community.<sup>3</sup> This sense of community and the importance of the church to that community is seen in the testamentary actions of Bridgnorth's middling sort. They remembered numerous religious institutions in the town, gave gifts to the poorer in their society, provided for town maintenance, and arranged family remembrance. Duffy discusses the increasing number of prayers for the dead and the offerings to the poor which would accompany memorial masses. In this, we see the middling sort create their own memorable

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<sup>2</sup> Staples, *Daughters of London*.

<sup>3</sup> Eamon Duffy, *Stripping the Altar: Traditional Religion in England, 1400 – c. 1580* (London: London University Press, 1992).

ceremonies through their funeral wishes, which would display their wealth through ongoing commemorative practices. These themes from Duffy's work are discussed below through the testamentary evidence. The case studies from Bridgnorth reflect Duffy's approach, which incorporated individual writings, parish records and marginal notes from devotional volumes to bring out the personal voice and experience of his subjects, allowing us some insight into the individual, which is also an aim of the current study.

The personal demonstrations of belief in the context of popular trends can also be seen in the work of R. N. Swanson, who studied the different forms of religious belief in the changing society of the Middle Ages in his work *Church and society in late Medieval England*.<sup>4</sup> Swanson explored the themes of collective/private and individual/private further in his works on religious devotion to reveal that the individual was very much aware of these collective and private areas when planning their funeral and how they would display this. This would reflect their status and image but also their personal commemoration which came from Mass bequests and chantry patronage for past and present kin.<sup>5</sup> The middling sort had a strong presence in their towns and the relationship between the community and the church is developed further in the work of Nigel Saul.

Saul discussed the relationship between the church and its society in local parishes and noted that the gentry of a parish frequently colonised ecclesiastical space for commemoration.<sup>6</sup> This is of particular relevance to the current study, as the Bridgnorth deeds witness the middling sort beginning to challenge the gentry for space in the town's churches and in the manner in which they imitated the gentry's practices of commemoration and engagement with devotional trends. Saul notes that the relationship between those who behaved in this way could be interpreted as collaborative or adversarial to others in their community.<sup>7</sup> This is reflective of the idea of closure theory as presented by Stephen Rigby and discussed in the introduction, in

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<sup>4</sup> R. N. Swanson, *Church and Society in Late Medieval England*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn. (Blackwell, Oxford, 1993).

<sup>5</sup> R. N. Swanson, *Religion and Devotion in Europe, c. 1215 - c. 1515* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995).

<sup>6</sup> Nigel Saul, *Lordship and Faith: The Church in English Gentry and the Parish Church in the Middle Ages* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017).

<sup>7</sup> Saul, *Lordship and Faith*, p. 11.

that the collaborative nature of the middling sort saw them obtain a privileged position for themselves through the creation of a group of inferiors in the town, while they themselves remained the inferiors of the gentry and nobility. It is common for inferior groups to attempt to obtain some of the privileges of their social superiors.<sup>8</sup> This can further address how the middling sort came to monopolise, not only the property market of the town, as discussed in the next chapter, but also the religious practices. This they managed through their personal and business partnerships which brought their wealth which they wished to display. Studies such as those mentioned above, inform the historian, as well as those looking to develop an understanding of the institutional ruling of the church with evidence of medieval culture in a parish locality, of how this culture was presented through its society.

### **Bridgnorth's testamentary evidence**

An examination of Bridgnorth's testamentary evidence reflects the findings of the above studies of the social culture in these localities. This social culture is explored in the work of Joel Rosenthal and Clive Burgess, who considered wills when determining the spiritual piety of medieval lay people.<sup>9</sup> Teofilo F. Ruiz used wills to discover medieval mentalities, noting the shift from otherworldly concerns to more pragmatic concerns about property, charity and family in medieval Castile.<sup>10</sup> Ruiz included wills, legal codes and charters in his study and noted the 'transformation in mental landscape', shifting to economic and social changes which are similar to those across Western Europe.<sup>11</sup> Jenny Kermode also utilised testamentary evidence, as noted in previous chapters, to study merchants' status, highlighting the sense of class identity which emerged from their spiritual practices and the confidence they had in those

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<sup>8</sup> Rigby, *English Society*, p. 139. When looking at class structure and change note Brenner's analysis of the procedures behind class relations and power in his debate on the transition phase from feudalism to capitalism. However, local studies such as this on Bridgnorth do not consistently support his theory, as a single model cannot be transported from one demographic to another and sufficiently explain the diverse developments of any one class structure in the localities. Developments in England must thus be viewed differently from the developments in France and Germany to which Brenner refers. Brenner, 'Agrarian Roots of Capitalism', pp. 16-113.

<sup>9</sup> Joel Rosenthal, *The Purchase of Paradise: Gift Giving and the Aristocracy, 1307-1485* (London: Routledge, 1972); Clive Burgess, 'Late Medieval Wills and Pious Convention: Testamentary Evidence Reconsidered', in Michael Hicks (ed.), *Profit, Piety and the Profession in Later Medieval England* (Gloucester: Sutton, 1990), pp. 14-33.

<sup>10</sup> Teofilo f. Ruiz, *From Heaven to Earth: The Reordering of Castilian Society, 1150-1530* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004).

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 152.



entrusted with their fortunes who served as their executors or guardians.<sup>12</sup> This played a part in the development of the middling sort's identity and networks and their understanding of their status and place within their society and hierarchy. They understood this status both as flowing from the wealth they held and how they chose to spend it on their memorial bequests. These actions were always in some way an emulation of the status of those above them in this early transition phase of the fourteenth century. We see the emerging middling sort become a firmer group in society as the century progressed, as historians of the early modern period have noted.

While studying the testamentary evidence from Bridgnorth, the networks and social groups with which the individuals associated support the evidence from the previous chapters. Patterns of bequests from the middling sort show who were important in their networks and kinship groups. The range of beneficiaries shows the depth and range of bonds, status and networks in Bridgnorth's community.

The middling sort who left behind wills during this study period can be seen as a group who had enough wealth and possessions to warrant leaving a will. This evidence must be placed in the context of the findings of this study as a whole, as they do not paint a complete picture. For example, a widow's portion or dower is not always specified, as it was a legal condition that she should receive it on her husband's death and bequests made before death are also absent. Unlike the level of detail that can be gleaned from property transactions, testamentary evidence can appear vague and although direct family ties can be seen, bequests to those outside of the direct family can be difficult to place. Despite these drawbacks, when placed alongside the evidence presented in the study overall and seen in the context of the dearth of evidence for this particular topic, it is fortuitous that what does remain is from middling sort individuals. Through an analysis of the available evidence and utilising it fully, we can identify the social status, wealth, ideas of community, family ties and social networks which are the key aspects of the middling sort in this study, but in the testamentary evidence, we get this in their own words. Indeed, it is inheritance and

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<sup>12</sup> Kermode, *Medieval Merchants*.

bequests that provide a window into social relationships, family friendships, gender and status.

The wills from Bridgnorth are not numerous, but of those that survive, the most comprehensive belong to William de la Hulle, John Collyng, Robert ad Portam and the probate of Walter Bagot. Alongside these I have also included the testamentary evidence of Alice Rondulph, whose seals have been previously discussed, in order to consider the similarities between both men and women of the elite middling sort. There is no more testamentary evidence in the collection that allows a thorough comparison between the men and women of Bridgnorth, but the evidence from Alice proves that the social disability of women due to their gender did not prevent them from issuing bequests in the same manner as men of the same status.<sup>13</sup> This also reveals the expectations and wishes of female testators and the degree to which they resemble those of men, not least in regards to spiritual wellbeing. Alice was no exception to this and her pious donations appear to have been appropriate for an elite middling sort woman. This suggests that the middling sort knew their worth as a group and that it was the wider society which dictated the limitations on women, where a wife could only make a will with her husband's consent or, in Alice's case, when widowed.

By comparing these wills with evidence presented in the Bridgnorth deeds relating to property and lineage, one element of the townspeople's identity can be assessed, notably the way they identified themselves. This is demonstrated here through the ways in which they wished to be remembered in the town, as witnessed through their bequests. William de la Hulle was a wealthy member of Bridgnorth's community, whose will is by far the most detailed to survive in the records here studied. He was assessed in the lay subsidy of 1327 for 20s, a sum which identified him as one of the wealthiest men in the area.<sup>14</sup> William also served as a burgess of Bridgnorth, as stated in grants from 1323, 1325 and 1340, although whether he served

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<sup>13</sup> Staples, *Daughters of London*.

<sup>14</sup> LLGC/NLW, Pitchford Hall (Ottley) Papers, deed 331; Fletcher and Augden, *Shropshire Lay Subsidy Roll*, pp. 370-373.

continually throughout this period is unknown.<sup>15</sup> As previously shown, the witness lists reveal the most active members of Bridgnorth's social hierarchy and they are, in turn, the wealthiest. These men are active members within their community and throughout the deed collection and each in turn meet the criteria of the middling sort described in the introduction.<sup>16</sup> In comparison to William de la Hulle, John Collyng could be considered to have held a moderate status within the town, as illustrated through bequests in his will. The same applies to Walter Bagot and Robert ad Portam. John Collyng and Walter Bagot would have been at the lower end of the middling sort, as identified in this study, with those such as William de la Hulle and the Rondulph family being of the elite. The evidence in their testamentary evidence demonstrates this, as they use the funds available to emulate the standards of those above them in the social hierarchy.

Before we continue, it should be noted that wills only present a picture of wealth possessed and held at the time the will was drawn up; past wealth cannot be judged by this static record, nor can the rise and fall in fortunes following the will's creation. Indeed, decisions made in anticipation of death often hinged upon what had been granted in the past and the entirety of middling sort social relations and wealth cannot be gleaned from these documents. However, along with the study on personal identification, as seen in Chapter 2, and the middling sort's property transactions, discussed in Chapter 4, this testamentary evidence provides support for the social relations and networks of Bridgnorth's middling sort.

Wills thus do not provide evidence of previous fortunes, gifts and social connections made during one's life, they also fail to mention the provisions someone made to the church throughout their life. Many wealthy people would donate during their lifetime. An example of this from Bridgnorth was Nicholas Pitchford, previously discussed, who with his wife, Johanna, established a chantry with the Franciscan Friars.<sup>17</sup> Wills do, however, reflect the priorities of the middling sort and begin to

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<sup>15</sup> LLGC/NLW, Pitchford Hall (Ottley) Papers, deeds 1307, 2450, and 398, William de la Hulle described as a burgess of Bridgnorth.

<sup>16</sup> LLGC/NLW, Pitchford Hall (Ottley) Papers.

<sup>17</sup> Burgess, 'By Quick and by Dead', pp. 837-858; Swanson, *Church and Society*, p. 296; LLGC/NLW, Pitchford Hall (Ottley) Papers, deed 1057, Nicholas Pitchford's grant for Masses in chantry with Franciscan friars.

establish self-perceptions and attitudes towards family, church and community, as well as the conditions and expectations imposed upon testators wishing to be perceived as “doing the right thing”. Robert Swanson has suggested that expenditure of this nature represented the influences of contemporary piety through practical expression.<sup>18</sup> The nature of a medieval town such as Bridgnorth, where chantries and Masses for the dead were common, as they were in all communities, shows a desire not to bury and forget their dead but actively remember them.

The method of study of the testamentary evidence here follows the diplomatic format of the deed, addressing the bequests as they appeared in the will. This typically began with information as to where the testator wished to be buried, which provides details of Bridgnorth’s religious institutions. Following the request for location of burial, testators turned to their spiritual patronage, which illuminates one of the ways in which the middling sort could display their wealth in the town and is noted in the work of Jenny Kermode in her studies of the Merchant class from York, Beverley and Hull.<sup>19</sup> In Kermode’s work, we see the efforts of the middling sort to emulate the practices of the gentry and act as examples of middling sort wealth, which began to compare with that of the gentry in this period. The development of the middling sort and their place in their society brought about the visual comparisons they began to make with the gentry. One of the strongest examples of this was their spiritual patronage within the town and its environs.

Visual displays of wealth by the middling sort are strongest when studying bequests to and patronage of religious institutions, but the middling sort also emulated the gentry through the visible impacts they had on the town, most notably through the maintenance of transport routes such as the highways and bridges. Examples of this are evident through the testamentary evidence from the case studies included here to a greater or lesser degree despite the level of status and wealth the individual held in the middling sort. Identifying longer-term trends of the middling sort is beyond the scope of the deeds studied here, but they do allow us to question

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<sup>18</sup> Swanson, *Church and Society*, p. 253; R. N. Swanson, *Indulgences in the Pre-Reformation Diocese of York* (York: University of York Press, 2011).

<sup>19</sup> Kermode, ‘Merchants of Three Northern English Towns’, pp. 7-38.

whether these acts were truly the wish of conscientious citizens or another way for the wealthy middling sort to display their status and wealth to the town.

The status and wealth of the middling sort is evident in the deeds from the property and land a testator held at the time their will was drawn up. It is difficult to follow the sale and rental of any single property in Bridgnorth through the deeds, or, indeed, properties held by any one individual throughout the study period, but the wills show the assets and wealth held at a specific point in time, the value of them and who would inherit them. The testamentary evidence of these individuals reveals that William de La Hulle held land outside of Bridgnorth, whereas John Collyng's assets were town-based. This example of comparative wealth shows that although John Collyng enjoyed comfortable surroundings, he was on the very periphery of the middling sort, whereas William was firmly established and placed at the other extreme. This begins to establish an image of the lived experience of the middling sort in Bridgnorth and the impact this group had on their surroundings. It also shows what they held and contributed to the prosperity of the town outside of trade and commerce to a greater or lesser degree due to the disparity in their wealth. But as noted, wealth was only one factor, a by-product of the middling sort criteria laid out in the introduction. If an individual met the criteria of networks, witnessing deeds, holding property and being an active party in the deeds the stated number of times of twelve times and ten for property activities, they still belonged in the middling sort.

## **Networks**

Table 8 below shows how each testator studied here remembered their family and friends and who they chose as executors. In a town the size of Bridgnorth, these details demonstrate their social connections and partnerships, which could be born from trade and commercial networks, as well as from family. The testamentary evidence shows, as expected, that immediate kinship groups are the main beneficiaries as they would have been most prominent in the testator's life. Indeed, the people referred to in the testamentary evidence clearly illuminate the networks amongst the middling sort, especially in testamentary evidence over property deeds, which is personal and demonstrates the meaning of the recipient to the testator. That is not to say it was always a friendship; business connections could also inherit,

perhaps as a way to ingratiate themselves for their family's sake following their death and to advance social and economic goals. Gifts to acknowledge good service or partnerships were also common, essentially indicating the community links and neighbourly significance to the testator. It is here that testaments are important social documents, as they demonstrate the nature and intensity of the relationships of the beneficiaries with the testator. As Janet Finch noted in her study of testamentary disposition in contemporary Britain,

a will is a document which lays open to public inspection aspects of the pattern of relationships which a testator had with members of his or her family and with other people.<sup>20</sup>

Seeing who was included in the bequests furthers our understanding of social status amid the economic divisions of the middling sort. Social networks, as presented through testamentary evidence, can be explored in geographical networks, but this lies beyond the scope of this study. The people involved in the disposal of property and wealth can show the geography of trade and business networks in a regional economy, as well as the structures of town community.

The remainder of this chapter follows the information laid out in Table 8 below, and discusses the place a testator wished to be buried, spiritual patronage, bequests to family and friends, care for their community, how the middling sort presented their wealth, the assets they held in the town, the provisions they made for family and business partners before ending with a discussion on their choice of executor.

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<sup>20</sup> Janet Finch, *Will, Inheritance and Families* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997), p. 10.

	William de la Hulle	John Collyng	Walter Bagot	Robert ad Portam	Alice nee Rondulph
Place of Burial	Church of St Leonard's, in the Chapel of the Holy Trinity.	Porch of the Church of St Leonard's.	Cemetery of St Leonard's.	Cemetery of St Leonard's.	
Town Maintenance	4s Pavement repairs. 40s for work on Severn Bridge.	Residue of estate to go to repairs of Severn Bridge.			
Family bequests	£40 and land in and around Bridgnorth to his son Edmund. Land to his other children, John, Richard and Katherine. Home in Hungrey St and residue of estate to wife, Mabel.	Life tenement in Millstreet and grange in Mulneway to wife Annora and following her death to his daughters Matilda and Isabel.	To his sons, Richard, Robert and John, rents from tenements in Bridgnorth. 13s, 4d. to his daughter Agnes of which Robert, Richard and John were to pay 6s. 8d., 3s, 4d and 3s. 4d., respectively	His house and a tenement in Little Bridgnorth to his brother John. Other land in Bridgnorth and 140 Sheep and 35 lambs.	Sister Agnes a gown with a hood.
Friends	£18 to John Rondulph to aid the marriage of his daughters Alice and Agnes. 20s to John de Burlegh. 10s to John de Legthral.	All his other lands and two incense boats to his executors Nicholas Collyng and John Besselowe, Chaplain.			Sibil her maid a red robe with hood, a black gown and bed clothes, one hood. John Leuay a green gown with scarlet hood and a piece of silver. Alice Bagot 20s.
Executors	Wife Mabel, sons Edmund, John and Richard.	Nicholas Collyng and John Besselowe, Chaplain.	Sons Richard, Robert and John.	Brother, John.	John atte Yates, her sister Agnes, Henry le Bryn.

**Table 8 Details of the main features of the testamentary evidence**<sup>21</sup>

## Location of burial

The importance of burial place saw testators state the location they wished to be buried, which was often in their parish church and perhaps in front of a specific altar.

<sup>21</sup> LLGC/NLW, Pitchford Hall (Ottley) Papers; SA, Mrs Dyas' Collection.

This information is missing for Alice Rondulph, as she was a resident of Chester at the time of her death. William de la Hulle wished to be buried at St Leonard's church in the Chapel of the Holy Trinity.<sup>22</sup> John Collyng wished for burial in the porch of St Leonard's, whereas Walter Bagot wished to be buried in the cemetery, a physical space apart from the spiritual building, as did Robert ad Portam.<sup>23</sup> Burial inside the church was sometimes reserved for the elite and a person's social status could be determined by their place of burial within the church itself.<sup>24</sup> The physical placement of the testators' bodies reinforces the above point of William being of the highest level of the middling sort, with John Collyng and Walter Bagot residing at a lower level of this group at this point.

In fact, Powicke and Cheney note that lay burials, when located inside the church building, are problematic as such locations were connected to different degrees of honour, prestige, wealth and status of the individual, which is not always clear in the deeds.<sup>25</sup> In the Statute of Chichester in 1292, an injunction was passed that there should be no indiscriminate burials in the church or chancel except for the lords of the manor, patrons of the church, and their wives with the intention of ensuring honour and nobility.<sup>26</sup> Similarly, a mandate to the Dean of Carlisle issued in 1342 by the Bishop prohibited burial of anyone within the church except for the patrons and rectors, unless a bishop's license had been granted.<sup>27</sup> Burial inside a church took careful account of the geography of sanctity and the importance of the individual in relation to this.<sup>28</sup> It is also to be remembered that a testator might

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<sup>22</sup> Heath, 'Urban Piety', p. 215; Kermode, *Medieval Merchants*, p. 141, n. 155; LLGC/NLW, Pitchford Hall (Ottley) Papers, deed 331, will of William de la Hulle; deed 1420, Robert Pitchford also chose to be buried at St Leonards, as did John Atte, deed 717, and Edmund Pitchford, deed 236.

<sup>23</sup> LLGC/NLW, Pitchford Hall (Ottley) Papers, deed 587, Walter Bagot wishing to be buried in the cemetery; deed 137, Robert ad Portam; deed 78, will of Richard de Cagweley; deed 89, will of John Collyng.

<sup>24</sup> R. Dinn, "'Monuments Answerable to Men's Worth': Burial Patterns, Social Status and Gender in Late Medieval Bury St Edmund's", *Journal of Ecclesiastical History*, 46 (1996), p. 247.

<sup>25</sup> F. M. Powicke and C. R. Cheney (eds.), *Councils and their Synods Relating to the English Church A.D. 1205-1313* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1964), p. 117.

<sup>26</sup> Powicke and Cheney, *Councils and Synods*, p. 96.

<sup>27</sup> Christopher Daniell, *Death and Burial in Medieval England, 1066-1550* (London: Routledge, 1998), p. 97; John Ross, 'The Register of John Kirkby, the Bishop of Carlisle', *Canterbury and York Society*, 79 (1993), p. 125.

<sup>28</sup> Daniell, *Death and Burial*, p. 97.



request a place of burial, but it was never guaranteed that executors would carry this out or that permission would be granted.

The most popular place for burial was in the choir (*choro*) of the church, which could cause confusion as to the intention of the testator. In some churches, the nave itself could be called the choir, but choirs might also exist inside a chantry.<sup>29</sup> The chancel or the space near the high altar was mainly reserved for clergy, with most burials in descending order of religious importance from rector, vicar and chaplain followed by gentlemen, knights and esquires of the county.<sup>30</sup> This was followed by widows, ladies and daughters of the gentry and nobility, then burgesses and citizens.<sup>31</sup> This pattern suggests that the chancel was seen as the most holy place and therefore the clergy took precedence. Spaces more available to the majority of the town, but still appointed through social hierarchy, were located next to altars or within chantries, the nave and aisle; the desire to be laid to rest in such locations can be seen in surviving wills where most requests came from citizens, merchants and traders.<sup>32</sup> In these parts of the church, we are less likely to find clergy and nobility, suggesting that areas away from the chancel were considered to be less holy and further from the spiritual centre of the church.<sup>33</sup>

We see indications of such patterns amongst testators at Bridgnorth, notably through the will of William de la Hulle. William wished to be buried at St Leonard's Church in the Chapel of the Holy Trinity; this seems to reflect a more general fashion for this part of the church which was accessible for burial to the leading merchants and wealthy members of the town.<sup>34</sup> If access to a Chapel or Chancery was not possible, requests were often made for specific altars, the most popular being the altar of the Blessed Virgin. The proximity of one's burial place to these altars in the church reflected on the benefit to their soul. Following requests for burial at a specific altar, burial near specific images was popular. Here, again, the Virgin Mary was the

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<sup>29</sup> Ross, 'Register of John Kirkby', p. 125.

<sup>30</sup> Daniell, *Death and Burial*, p. 97.

<sup>31</sup> Daniell, *Death and Burial*, p. 97.

<sup>32</sup> Daniell, *Death and Burial*, p. 98.

<sup>33</sup> Daniell, *Death and Burial*, p. 98.

<sup>34</sup> Heath, 'Urban Piety', p. 215; Kermode, *Medieval Merchants*, p. 141, n. 155; LLGC/NLW, Pitchford Hall (Ottley) Papers, deed 331, will of William de la Hulle.

most requested, as seen in the request of Robert Thomas, called Robert ad Bridgnorth, who wished for burial by the image of the Virgin Mary in St Leonard's in Bridgnorth.<sup>35</sup>

The availability of space inside the church was limited and depended on the status of those requesting burial, but burial in other areas of the church was also common, for instance in Walter Bagot's request for burial in the cemetery of St Leonard's and John Collyng's wish for burial in the porch, areas of the church considered to be a threshold space.<sup>36</sup> These burial places, as requested by the testators, away from the main body of the church could suggest the two men were aware of their social status in the town. Conversely, William de la Hulle seems to have been confident that he would be able to obtain burial in St Leonard's Church in the Chapel of the Holy Trinity, which in turn illustrates his status as the elite middling sort. John Collyng was an active member in the community and witnessed deeds and left a moderate amount of property and wealth, whereas Walter Bagot held a lower status again, which meant he knew his social position in the middling sort was on the periphery and so he requested burial accordingly.

In combination with the area of the church in which a testator wished to be buried, requests for burial in the proximity to relatives are also evident. Popular requests by the laity were for burial near a spouse, as requested by John Collyng, who not only wished to be buried in the porch of the church, but also to be buried with his wife. Whereas Robert Thomas, called Robert ad Bridgnorth, requested to be buried near his parents by the image of the Virgin Mary in St Leonard's, as stated above.<sup>37</sup> These requests combined the testator's wishes for the care of their physical remains and that of their soul. Evidence for this can be seen through the care taken to provide for the memory of both through bequests emphasising active remembrance of the dead within society.

This behaviour was not isolated to Bridgnorth and was part of a more general social practice, differing only in the degree to which the middling sort could or could

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<sup>35</sup> LLGC/NLW, Pitchford Hall (Ottley) Papers, deed 537.

<sup>36</sup> LLGC/NLW, Pitchford Hall (Ottley) Papers, deed 91, will of Walter Bagot.

<sup>37</sup> LLGC/NLW, Pitchford Hall (Ottley) Papers, deed 537.

not use their wealth and influence to secure the kinds of burial plots they sought. In this study we see the elite middling sort gain burial access inside the church and the proximity to the main altars declines with their social status.

### **Spiritual patronage**

Displays of remembrance inside religious institutions can be seen in the testamentary evidence from Bridgnorth. William de la Hulle's will refers to institutions, buildings and church interiors, as donations and endowments to religious houses were prominent features in bequests, highlighting the status and importance of the church to the town, especially during times of spiritual uncertainty, such as the plague years.<sup>38</sup> Jenny Kermode, in her study of merchants from the north of England, suggested that perhaps this uncertainty was encouraged by the Church, since religious houses and hospitals may not have survived had it not been for donations by wealthy members of society wishing to lead by example.<sup>39</sup> An example of such pious patronage was seen in a deed where Nicholas Pitchford and his wife, Johanna, invested in Masses to be said for themselves and their family, both living and dead.<sup>40</sup> Evidence of gifts left to religious houses during a testator's lifetime are not referred to in wills and testamentary evidence, but can provide details of a testator's religious charity, especially for the wealthier leading members of society such as Nicholas Pitchford and William de la Hulle, discussed below.

That William de la Hulle behaved in such a way is evident from an agreement between him and Roger the Prior of the hospital of the Holy Trinity in Bridgnorth, in 1340.<sup>41</sup> This agreement outlines a grant of a tenement in Bridgnorth between the conduit and the tenement formerly of Roger Broune for an annual rent of 60s, a large sum.<sup>42</sup> The agreement also included a grant of 20 acres of land in the fields of Bridgnorth, not specified here, on the condition of the appointment for three chaplains to pray for the souls of William and the members of his family.<sup>43</sup> This grant

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<sup>38</sup> Swanson, *Church and Society*, p. 253.

<sup>39</sup> Kermode, 'The Merchants of Three Northern English Towns', pp. 7-38.

<sup>40</sup> LLGC/NLW, Pitchford Hall (Ottley) Papers, deed 1057, Nicholas Pitchford and his wife, Johanna, obtain licence for Masses in Chantry with Franciscan Friars.

<sup>41</sup> LLGC/NLW, Pitchford Hall (Ottley) Papers, deed 2450, William's agreement with the Hospital of the Holy Trinity in Bridgnorth.

<sup>42</sup> LLGC/NLW, Pitchford Hall (Ottley) Papers, deed 2450.

<sup>43</sup> LLGC/NLW, Pitchford Hall (Ottley) Papers, deed 2450.

did not state whether these prayers were to be continued over a period of time and is the only surviving evidence of William receiving prayers in this manner, but it is to be assumed that a man of his social status would have made grants like this on more than one occasion.

If wealth permitted, services could be confirmed as legacies after death. In 1370, confirmation for a legacy made by William for the celebration of divine service in the church of St Leonard at the Holy Cross and St Michael's was confirmed between the executors of William's will, his sons, and the chaplain of St Leonard.<sup>44</sup> Piety was however not just displayed by the wealthy, as Robert A. Wood discovered in his study of poor widows in London. He noted how even the poor, such as Matilda atte Wyche, who left the very small sum of 4d., strived to make provisions for the church.<sup>45</sup> Attention to religious foundations is evident throughout the surviving Bridgnorth material, emphasising the spiritual needs of the testator and his or her spiritual concerns for family as a main preoccupation.<sup>46</sup>

### **Donations of Bridgnorth's middling sort**

As previously discussed, donations and endowments to churches during one's lifetime were an important part of the middling sort's display of wealth and acts of remembrance. These displays of wealth continue in the contents of a will where details of the physical appearance of the church during a period of mourning are detailed. William de la Hulle asked that the candles which illuminated his corpse be subsequently distributed to the altars and churches in Bridgnorth.<sup>47</sup> Such requests demonstrate how mourning practices continued after the funeral and William ensured that he would be remembered throughout the town with the distribution of the candles that illuminated his corpse. It is not stated if the candles William requested were made from tallow or wax, but judging by the wealth he held, it can be assumed that they would have been the latter.

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<sup>44</sup> LLGC/NLW, Pitchford Hall (Ottley) Papers, deed 91.

<sup>45</sup> Robert A. Wood, 'Poor Widows', in Caroline Barron and Anne F. Sutton (eds.), *Medieval London Widows 1300-1500* (London: Hambledon Press, 1994), pp. 55-71.

<sup>46</sup> Kermode, 'Three Merchant Towns', p. 11; Kermode, 'Sentiment and Survival', pp. 5-18; Kermode, *Medieval Merchants*, p. 118, n. 10; M. Spufford, 'Scribes of Villagers' Wills in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth centuries', *Local Population Studies*, 7 (Autumn, 1971), pp. 28-43; Hanawalt, *The Wealth of Wives*; Wood, 'Poor Widows'.

<sup>47</sup> LLGC/NLW, Pitchford Hall (Ottley) Papers, deed 331, will of William de la Hulle.

William's endowments to the churches in Bridgnorth continued when he bequeathed the sum of £10 to the priests, deacon and clerk officiating at his funeral in the Church of St Leonard's, Bridgnorth, with half a mark to the windows and altars there, specifying that 2s should be used for the lighting of each of the altars. He wished the same in the Church of St Mary Magdalene in Bridgnorth, again for altars to be lit.<sup>48</sup> William also made numerous donations to religious orders and hospitals, where such donations from wealthy men contributed to the success of these hospitals and smaller religious foundations.<sup>49</sup> William was certainly a patron of religious houses as prior to his death in 1340, the deeds reveal an agreement between William and Roger, Prior of the hospital of Holy Trinity of Bridgnorth, as mentioned above.<sup>50</sup> The agreement granted use of a tenement in Bridgnorth to the Priory and 20 acres of land in the fields of the town on condition that three chaplains were appointed to pray for the souls of William and his family.<sup>51</sup> William de la Hulle may have made several such donations and requests to the religious houses of Bridgnorth during his life, but records of these have not been found.

What are present in William's will are his donations to a number of religious houses, including the black and white nuns of Breowede and the poor brothers and sisters of the hospital of St James. He also gave half a mark each to the Franciscan, Dominican and Austin friars of Shrewsbury, and 40d. to the Austin friars of Ludlow.<sup>52</sup> Well-travelled merchants sometimes made bequests to churches and religious houses outside their home town, which William also did, with a bequest of half a mark to the Franciscan friars of Lichfield.<sup>53</sup> It is perhaps not surprising that William included Lichfield, as Bridgnorth lay in its diocese and a man of William's wealth would wish to display his networks and connections. William's bequests reflect his living environment outside Bridgnorth, presenting him as someone who had travelled and in doing so gained an awareness and knowledge of his wider surroundings. This outlook

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<sup>48</sup> LLGC/NLW, Pitchford Hall (Ottley) Papers, deed 331, will of William de la Hulle.

<sup>49</sup> John Miller and Edward Hatcher, *Medieval England: Rural Society and Economic Change, 1086-1348* (London: Longman, 1978).

<sup>50</sup> LLGC/NLW, Pitchford Hall (Ottley) Papers, deed 2450, William de la Hulle agreeing a tenement and land to the Hospital of the Holy Trinity, dated 1340.

<sup>51</sup> LLGC/NLW, Pitchford Hall (Ottley) Papers, deed 2450, William de la Hulle.

<sup>52</sup> LLGC/NLW, Pitchford Hall (Ottley) Papers, deed 331, will of William de la Hulle.

<sup>53</sup> LLGC/NLW, Pitchford Hall (Ottley) Papers, deed 331. Bridgnorth was in the diocese of Lichfield and Coventry, while also remaining a royal peculiar.

can be seen as a feature of the middling sort in this study, as they were not wholly town based although they maintained closer connections to their town and community than the gentry of the area.

William de la Hulle included gifts to churches at Stretton, Chetyton, Upton, Morville and sixteen others in Shropshire.<sup>54</sup> Specific bequests were made to the prior and brethren at the hospital of the Holy Trinity in Bridgnorth for special prayers for his soul and to the hospital's former chaplain which supported an annual rent of 3s, 6d.<sup>55</sup> This demonstrated an understanding of his community and care for his spiritual wellbeing, which was often seen at funerals in the form of cash distributions to the poor.<sup>56</sup> William made provisions for the poor stating that, on the day of his funeral, they were to receive 1d. each along with 40d. for clothes and shoes for those most in need.<sup>57</sup> This is consistent with Miri Rubin's observation that distribution of alms at a funeral was another way of enticing many to attend – as was the handing out of money to each 'priest celebrating'.<sup>58</sup> Margaret Yates noted in her study of Western Berkshire, 1300-1600, that this form of benefaction is one of the few ways that rural poverty and landlessness can be gauged in records.<sup>59</sup> The use of the word 'poor' in the will also indicates an awareness of status through the language used. Here we have William silently expressing himself as a wealthy man, as the 'poor' who attend his funeral are of a different social collective than he himself.<sup>60</sup>

The motivation for this could be personal pious expression and self-aggrandisement, but it cannot be denied that donations and endowments to the church were regarded as a route to future redemption for the testator and their family. William made provisions for three priests to celebrate Mass for his soul and the souls of his wife, parents and kinsmen at St Leonard's church at all the altars and

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<sup>54</sup> LLGC/NLW, Pitchford Hall (Ottley) Papers, deed 331.

<sup>55</sup> LLGC/NLW, Pitchford Hall (Ottley) Papers, deed 331.

<sup>56</sup> M. Rubin, *Charity and Community in Medieval Cambridge* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), p. 1; Clare Gittings, *Death, Burial and the Individual in Early Modern England* (London: Croom Helm, 1984), pp. 26-9.

<sup>57</sup> LLGC/NLW, Pitchford Hall (Ottley) Papers, deed 331.

<sup>58</sup> M. Rubin, *Charity and Community*, p. 1; Gittings, *Death, Burial and the Individual*, pp. 26-9.

<sup>59</sup> Yates, *Town and Countryside*, p. 218.

<sup>60</sup> LLGC/NLW, Pitchford Hall (Ottley) Papers, deed 331.

Masses at Holy Cross and St Michael.<sup>61</sup> William further wished for Masses to be celebrated at St Milburge of Wenlock, leaving 10s and £6 to the church and monastery of Buildwas with the residue of his estate for Masses and other alms for his soul.<sup>62</sup> The use of Masses in this way has been described by Kermode as 'combining the spiritual intentions of prayers and collective remembrance while fulfilling a wider social purpose'.<sup>63</sup> It not only declared the individual's success and status but also their acceptance of responsibility for their family.<sup>64</sup> The ideas of family lineage and responsibility are not limited to men of the middling sort, as we see in the probate record of Alice Rondulph. Alice bequeathed four priests to celebrate mass in the Church of St Oswald of Chester and the Church of Bridgnorth for the souls of her late husband Richard le Bruin and for the souls of her parents.<sup>65</sup> Alice also donated a piece of high quality silver to the vicar of St Oswald's in Chester, in much the same manner as William de la Hulle, demonstrating that in some areas of social conduct and remembrance, gender did not change the actions of the individual.<sup>66</sup>

It was often noted in wills that a Mass should be recited 'perpetually', for a specified number of years or until the funds provided ran out. In such instances, provisions could be made in the form of revenue from rents, while tenements or other possessions may also have been given. Revenue from these would go towards funding a priest and any who may have helped to sing the Mass. The less expensive alternative was for an anniversary Mass to be said and this could also be funded by endowments from property rents, tenements or possessions. This type of Mass was not only less expensive to fund, but the use of an anniversary Mass also meant that it became a form of communal remembrance of the deceased's soul, as opposed to an individual remembrance by a chantry priest. The communal aspect of the remembrance would have been reinforced by the use of a Bede roll.<sup>67</sup> Bede rolls of this kind, listing the people of the parish for whom prayers were to be said at specific anniversaries, could

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<sup>61</sup> LLGC/NLW, Pitchford Hall (Ottley) Papers, deed 331.

<sup>62</sup> LLGC/NLW, Pitchford Hall (Ottley) Papers, deed 331.

<sup>63</sup> Kermode, 'Sentiment and Survival', p. 13.

<sup>64</sup> Kermode, 'Sentiment and Survival', p. 13.

<sup>65</sup> LLGC/NLW, Pitchford Hall (Ottley) Papers, deed 322, Alice nee Rondulph's probate.

<sup>66</sup> LLGC/NLW, Pitchford Hall (Ottley) Papers, deed 322, Alice nee Rondulph's probate.

<sup>67</sup> S. Wenzel, *Fasciculus Morum: A Fourteenth Century Preacher's Handbook* (London: Pennsylvania University Press, London University Press, 1989), pp. 411-415.

go back a significant amount of time and were a vital part of the religious life of the parish.<sup>68</sup>

### **Care for the community**

It was not only in spiritual bequests but also bequests to the benefit of the physical features of the town that reveal an understanding of a citizen's duty and priority to their town. Networks between Bridgnorth and its neighbours, as well as roads to ports further afield, were vital to the success of a merchants' trade. William de la Hulle's connections beyond the environs of Bridgnorth have been noted in his spiritual bequests. This is reinforced by the funds he left for pavement repairs, roads leading out of the town and for work on the Severn Bridge in Bridgnorth.<sup>69</sup> Bridge maintenance was essential to the town, as David Harrison noted, since few bridges had disappeared in this period due to lack of repair.<sup>70</sup>

Yates noted in her study of Western Berkshire that highway and bridge maintenance could be linked with wealthy individuals displaying their wealth over the immediate need of repair.<sup>71</sup> However, evidence from the locality of Bridgnorth would suggest such improvements were popular projects and could be seen as practical piety and as a way to create orderliness by the well-travelled, inspired by their experiences in larger cities. They then transferred this vision to the upkeep of the vicinity of their home town.<sup>72</sup> Those whose knowledge extended beyond their immediate locale to larger towns held different outlooks and perspectives to those of their neighbours.<sup>73</sup> A bidding prayer of the period encouraged congregations for 'thaim that brigges and strettes makes and amendes that God grant us part of thare gode dedes and thaim of oures'.<sup>74</sup> Pious beliefs were most likely the motivation for such bequests, because it

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<sup>68</sup> Christopher Coredon and Ann Williams, *A Dictionary of Medieval Terms and Phrases* (Cambridge, 2005), p. 36.

<sup>69</sup> LLGC/NLW, Pitchford Hall (Ottley) Papers, deed 331.

<sup>70</sup> David Harrison, *The Bridges of Medieval England: Transport and Society in 400-1800* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), p. 166.

<sup>71</sup> Yates, *Town and Countryside*, p. 218.

<sup>72</sup> John Thomson, 'Piety and Charity in Late Medieval London', *Journal of Ecclesiastical History*, 16 (1965), pp. 179, 187-8; W. K. Jordan, *The Charities of London, 1480-1600: The Aspirations and the Achievements of the Urban Society* (London: Routledge, 1996), p. 21.

<sup>73</sup> Kermode, 'Three Merchant Towns', p. 31; T. P. Cooper, 'The Medieval Highways, Streets, Open Ditches and Sanitary Conditions of the City of York', *Yorkshire Archaeological Journal*, 28 (1913), pp. 280-1.

<sup>74</sup> Quoted in Cooper, 'The Medieval Highways', pp. 280-1.



was not only the wealthy and well-travelled that made provisions for their physical environment, as further testamentary evidence from Bridgnorth demonstrates. These actions can also be a sign of the middling sort's awareness of their status and identity within the town. As discussed, maintaining the fabric of their environment may have been a pious act or the actions of the well-travelled citizen, but it can also be seen as "doing the right thing" and the correct behaviour expected of someone of their social standing. This highlights the middling sort's awareness of their status and their understanding that they all belonged to the same group despite differing degrees of wealth.

The will of William de la Hulle is not the sole example of the wealth of the middling sort in Bridgnorth. The will of John Collyng and the probate of Walter Bagot also show their wealth. Like William de la Hulle, John Collyng also made bequests for the upkeep of his local area and church. He also requested that, should his daughters die without heirs, the land they inherited should be sold and the profit distributed among the wardens of Bridgnorth's churches and the wardens of the Severn Bridge who were to use it for its upkeep and maintenance.<sup>75</sup> This may appear a common feature, but, as Swanson noted the fact that roads were maintained at all is the important point here.<sup>76</sup>

A testator's concern for the practical needs of their community is notable, especially in the testamentary evidence of men. The contrast between the testamentary evidence of Bridgnorth's men and its women is that women tended to make more bequests of clothing and personal items and fewer bequests to the town's practical needs such as road and bridge repair. Women seemed to focus on close friends and family, whereas men, as seen in William's will, provided vestments and altar cloths to churches, with common fabrics including embroidered damask and velvets.<sup>77</sup> This could be an example of women staying within a domestic sphere, whereas men of the ruling middling sort were required to travel for business. Alice's

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<sup>75</sup> LLGC/NLW, Pitchford Hall (Ottley) Papers, deed 89, will of John Collyng.

<sup>76</sup> Swanson, *Church and Society*, p. 307.

<sup>77</sup> Kermode, 'Three Merchant Towns', p. 35. Kermode noted garments left to parish churches included a velvet jacket left by John Petty in 1508, to be altered into vestments. Other gifts included a 'bed' or hangings and some garments to be hung near the altar.

bequests refer to clothing and small sums of money, which reflects the findings of Kathryn Kelsey Staples, whose study of London wills reveals bequests of clothing as appropriate bequests for persons outside of the immediate family.<sup>78</sup> Alice gave a red robe with hood to her maid Sibil, along with a black gown, a hood *capitum de secca* and green *bed puluerisatum cum rosis*.<sup>79</sup> Elizabeth Ellen Psalter's study of Kent communities noted that clothing was often described by colour and fabric, suggesting the social importance of this for some individuals.<sup>80</sup> Alice's gift to her maid, Sibil, demonstrates that her household was of importance to her and she intended to continue provisions for her servants, with whom she would have spent much time in her household. The age of Alice at her death can only be estimated based on her age upon marriage to Edmund Pitchford, c. 1340. Assuming she married in her mid-to-late teens or early twenties, she died in her fifties. Her health at the time of her death is unknown, but at this point, her household and indeed Sibil, her maid, would be those closest to her and would perhaps have cared for her at the end.<sup>81</sup> However, even if Alice had not been ailing, her household would still have been those with whom she spent most of her day. Caroline Barron noted that in wills of London widows, servants became more like friends than employees and bequests could reflect the circumstances of maids.<sup>82</sup>

Alice left a bed and clothes to Sibil, which may indicate her awareness of Sibil's living circumstances. The reference to bed and bedding could also be a form of dowry which Alice was providing for Sibil to assist her in marrying. A bequest of a bed or bedding made to a young woman could imply that it was 'against the marriage' and would aid her in obtaining a dowry.<sup>83</sup> Roberta Gilchrist noted a bride's dowry would

<sup>78</sup> Staples, *Daughters of London*, p. 125.

<sup>79</sup> LLGC/NLW, Pitchford Hall (Ottley) Papers, deed 322.

<sup>80</sup> Psalter, 'Difference in the Cultural Production', pp. 404, 406.

<sup>81</sup> LLGC/NLW, Pitchford Hall (Ottley) Papers, deed 391; Jean Ellenby and Belinda Harrould (eds.), *The Medieval Household* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984); Peter Fleming, *Family and Household in Medieval England* (London: Palgrave, 2001).

<sup>82</sup> Barron and Sutton, 'Introduction', pp.1-22.

<sup>83</sup> Roberta Gilchrist, *Medieval Life: Archaeology and the Life Cycle* (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 2012), p. 128. In a will, the bed could also be described as a 'chamber', which refers to the goods inside such as furniture and personal apparel. Anne Kettle notes the widow's "chamber" in London was equivalent in common law to paraphernalia or 'the clothes on her back and ornaments of her body', Kettle, 'My Wife Shall Have it', p. 91. Kathryn Kelsey Staples comments that in medieval and early modern society, the type of bed ranged from a simple wooden bed frame with mattress supported by strung cords to grander beds raised from the floor, which may have included bedposts and bed hangings, as well as

include many household textiles, particularly bedding and bedroom furniture, which became apparent through patterns of women's bequests, suggesting these items may have been property she brought to the marriage.<sup>84</sup> It also became the custom for husbands to bequeath to their wives a bed and chest.<sup>85</sup> The order of persons receiving bequests usually reflected their importance to the testator and in Alice's household, it is clear her maid, Sibil, was of importance as she was the first beneficiary.<sup>86</sup>

Alice's will also included bequests to her sister Agnes, still called Rondulph, who received a hood and a gown *gyd mixt*. Alice also included Agnes Bagot in her bequests with a gift of 20s; Agnes could have been a friend from Bridgnorth as the Bagot family were resident there. Walter Bagot's will is also studied in this chapter; he left provisions for his daughter, Agnes.<sup>87</sup> Alice continued in her bequests of clothing by giving John Leuay a green gown with a scarlet hood and piece of silver; the gift of a gown for a man may seem unusual as a gown, as stated in the deed, could imply the entire dress or outfit suggesting it was the value of the item and not the item itself which was bequeathed.<sup>88</sup> However, Kristen Burkholder found in her study of textile bequests from London wills that medieval women preferred to leave garments to other women for no more than practical reasons, as women were smaller than men and could have the item adjusted to fit.<sup>89</sup> Burkholder further suggests that this could have been due to lay men being more concerned with real estate than with moveable goods, so they only tended to mention particularly valuable goods in their wills. By contrast, women would bequeath less valuable items such as textiles and left four times the number of household textiles than did men.<sup>90</sup>

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trundle beds, which could slide underneath and were used by servants, Staples, *Daughters of London*, p. 130.

<sup>84</sup> Gilchrist, *Medieval Life*, pp. 127-128.

<sup>85</sup> J. S. Loengard, "'Which May Be Said to be Her Own': Widows and Goods in Late Medieval England", in Maryanne Kowaleski and P. J. P. Goldberg (eds.), *Medieval Domesticity: Home and Household in Medieval England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), pp. 162-176.

<sup>86</sup> Sheenan, 'The Influence of Canon Law', pp. 16-30, 121. William de le Hulle also made a bequest to his former clerk before any member of his family.

<sup>87</sup> LLGC/NLW, Pitchford Hall (Ottley) Papers, deed 322, Alice nee Rondulph's probate; deed 434, grants of members of the Bagot family, dated 1346; deed 587, probate of Walter Bagot.

<sup>88</sup> LLGC/NLW, Pitchford Hall (Ottley) Papers, deed 322, Alice nee Rondulph's probate.

<sup>89</sup> Kristen Burkholder, 'Threads Bared: Dress and Textiles in English wills', in Robin Netherton and Gale R. Owen-Crocker (eds.), *Medieval Clothing and Textiles* (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 2005), p. 139.

<sup>90</sup> Burkholder, 'Threads Bared', p. 138. Small items could indicate wealth as well as practicality. The will of Richard de Cagewelye shows bequests of a cup, best basin, best vat and his second-best basin.

## **Presentation of wealth by the middling sort**

The will of William de la Hulle is the most detailed of any of Bridgnorth's inhabitants, but his personal relationships are not as clear as those of other, less wealthy, members of the middling sort. William had a lavish funeral with expensive donations, but his family and personal relationships are rarely addressed, overshadowed instead by a show of public pageantry and social trends. This, Kermode has noted, was something the wealthy merchant class would actively seek to do as a lasting memorial of themselves. Aspects of this can be identified for the entire middling sort through testamentary evidence. Walter Bagot and Robert ad Portam present their personal relationships and concerns just as clearly as the wealthier members of the community.<sup>91</sup>

Although the original will of Walter Bagot has not survived, the probate of his will has and is dated 1341.<sup>92</sup> Walter's sons Richard, Robert and John were the executors of his will and charged with specific tasks following their father's death. Each was to pay a sum towards their father's funeral, Richard 13s., Robert 10s. and John 6s. 8d. Like William, Walter also left money, 2s. 6d. to the chaplain of St Leonard's. He remembered the Franciscan Friars of Bridgnorth, who were commonly patronised by the middling sort, with 2s.<sup>93</sup> The difference and expense in the funerals of William and Walter is notable in both their wealth and their personal voice. Where William details more expenditure, he does not include much detail about his family or how he will provide for them. Walter's will is the reverse. For Walter, we see specific details of who should contribute to the funeral, demonstrating that for the Bagot family, it was a family affair. This comparison may suggest Walter was poor – but only when compared to William, as he left 2s. to both the Chaplain of St Leonard's and the Franciscan Friars, which shows that he clearly possessed wealth.<sup>94</sup> This once again demonstrates the social position of these men in the middling sort, as the whole

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Although the materials of these items are not specified, there clearly was a difference in value between best and second best. Richard also left twelve silver spoons to John Rondulph; spoons were considered cherished goods and here it is likely that the twelve spoons were Apostle Spoons. LLGC/NLW, Pitchford Hall (Ottley) Papers, deed 78, will of Richard de Cagweleye.

<sup>91</sup> Kermode, 'The Merchants of Three Northern Towns'.

<sup>92</sup> LLGC/NLW, Pitchford Hall (Ottley) Papers, deed 587, probate of Walter Bagot.

<sup>93</sup> LLGC/NLW, Pitchford Hall (Ottley) Papers, deed 587.

<sup>94</sup> LLGC/NLW, Pitchford Hall (Ottley) Papers, deed 587.

family contributed to Walter's funeral and burial, which was not in the church. Walter also did not request prayers to be said on his behalf. The disparity of wealth is further noted when his probate requests that his sons contribute to his daughter's marriage. In contrast, William demonstrates his position at the other end of the middling sort through his choice of burial place but also the many prayers he had said for him in the numerous altars in churches throughout Bridgnorth and the fact that he had funds enough to bequest money to John Rondulph's daughters for their marriages.<sup>95</sup>

The differences between William and Walter's bequests indicate the scale of wealth for those who resided in the middling sort, however, despite the difference in terms of wealth, those of the middling sort all appeared to follow the same trends in their bequests. All testators show that charity and spiritual needs were met through donations to the local church and friars, who, as Kermode noted, were popular with the merchant class as seen in the bequests from Walter for 13s 4d. to the Franciscan friars in Bridgnorth.<sup>96</sup>

The theme of outwardly displaying wealth and status is continued further through the comparison of Walter and William where the latter donated to the friars prior to his death, as was fashionable for wealthy middling sorts. There is however little evidence of what he may have left to his son or family through his will. Surviving evidence confirms Walter had previously left land to his sons; in 1329 he granted his son, Richard, a tenement in Littlebridgnorth, a curtilage in the same area and a croft lying between Bridgnorth and the highway to Oldspital.<sup>97</sup> The following year in 1330 Walter left Richard another grant of a tenement at the head of the street called Littlebridgnorth and a croft in the same area between Bridgnorth and the highway leading to Oldspital.<sup>98</sup> From this evidence it would appear that members of the middling sort in possession of less fortune shared their property and wealth amongst their family. Although William's son would also have held and granted property in his

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<sup>95</sup> LLGC/NLW, Pitchford Hall (Ottley) Papers, deed 331, will of William de la Hulle.

<sup>96</sup> LLGC/NLW, Pitchford Hall (Ottley) Papers, deed 1420, Robert Pitchford's donations to the Franciscan Friars; deed 587, probate of Walter Bagot.

<sup>97</sup> LLGC/NLW, Pitchford Hall (Ottley) Papers, deed 1404.

<sup>98</sup> LLGC/NLW, Pitchford Hall (Ottley) Papers, deed 210, evidence of Walter Bagot leaving land to his son Richard, although deeds granting more land to Richard and his brothers may not survive, it is clear that there was an interest in the land in Littlebridgnorth.

own right, beside that of his father, the probate of Walter Bagot shows the inclusion of family on a far more personal level, a feature also evident in John Collyng's will.

John Collyng, like Walter, was a man of less fortune than William, but he can still be identified as middling sort; he emphasises the closeness of family as his testamentary evidence includes, again as does Walter's, more detail of next of kin. John Collyng requested that Nicholas Collyng act as his executor, alongside John Besselowe, chaplain. He also left Nicholas all of his land in the liberty of Bridgnorth, following the division of the land specified for other named beneficiaries.<sup>99</sup> John Collyng's will does not identify his relationship with Nicholas, as he is neither identified as a son nor included in specific bequests like John's wife, Annora, and daughters Isabell and Matilda. Nicholas could perhaps have been a brother or nephew, as John chose him rather than his wife, Anorra, as an executor.

Unlike William de la Hulle, John does display detailed wishes for his family, whereas William made a single mention of the property in which his wife was entitled to live following his death. John may not have chosen his wife as an executrix, but he did show great care and provision for her and his family in this life and the next. He bequeathed to her for life a tenement in Mulnerstret (Mill Street), which, following her death, would be inherited by his daughters and after them their heirs, with the same provisions made for a grange, croft, one acre of meadow in Mulneway and a butt of land in Searunefel (Severnfield).<sup>100</sup> The care of his wife is not only clear in the provisions made for her in his will, but John also stated that he wished to be buried in the porch (*porticus*) of St. Leonard's, near his wife.<sup>101</sup> This could suggest he paid for an area large enough for the two of them to be buried and indicates a desire to always be close to her. The money needed to establish this illustrates his belief in investment in his and his wife's spiritual wellbeing.

Those from the middling sort in possession of a smaller fortune than men such as William had more opportunity to make individual bequests to family in their wills. William's fortune would have been too vast for this and, as demonstrated above,

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<sup>99</sup> LLGC/NLW, Pitchford Hall (Ottley) Papers, deed 89, will of John Collyng.

<sup>100</sup> LLGC/NLW, Pitchford Hall (Ottley) Papers, deed 89.

<sup>101</sup> LLGC/NLW, Pitchford Hall (Ottley) Papers, deed 89.

those with a lesser degree of wealth included more bequests to their family. The result of this is that it introduced their personal voice into our sources. For example, Walter Bagot, when compared to William, detailed his intention for his children, whereas William's will set out the nature and expense of his funeral and endowments, with little mention of his family. Walter's provision for his children show that his daughter, Agnes, was to be subsidised by her brothers, Richard, Robert and John. Agnes was to receive 13s. 4d., of which Richard was to pay 6s. 8d., Robert 3s. 4d. and John 3s. 4d.<sup>102</sup> It is not stated whether this money was to be given immediately or upon her marriage as a dowry, but this information could have been included in the original will or agreed verbally before Walter's death. Walter's sons were not left an exact amount, but instead the rents issuing from various tenements and property in Bridgnorth.<sup>103</sup> Repeated here is the sense of a family bond and the care for kin, which is limited in the wills of the wealthier members of society who projected an image of their social status through their funeral, with gifts for their close family largely absent from the written record.

### **Town assets**

A middling-sort testator would have carefully looked at their assets, especially property, before considering the appropriate recipient from their family and friends in their network. Details of this kind are not always present in wills from Bridgnorth. However, the evidence from the selected deeds goes some way towards explaining how Bridgnorth's middling sort divided their wealth after death. Walter Bagot did not specify the amount of rents his sons were to receive from his property; however, the very fact that Walter saw the property as profitable shows his wealth through the assets he held. The ownership of property in the town meant Walter could lease it out to tenants and sub-tenants and take part in the property market, as evident from the bequests to his sons. As discussed in the following chapter on Bridgnorth's development and urbanisation, this renting activity placed many of the middling sort

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<sup>102</sup> LLGC/NLW, Pitchford Hall (Ottley) Papers, deed 587, Walter Bagot's will, what his sons should pay towards their sister.

<sup>103</sup> LLGC/NLW, Pitchford Hall (Ottley) Papers, deed 587. Walter left his sons Richard, Robert and John annual rents issuing from tenements from John, son of Reginald de Leye for lands and tenements in his tenure, 5 and half pence, from tenements in the tenements of Alice Dyer, 7 and half pence, lands in the tenure of Edmund le Palmer, 16 pence and from an acre of land in the tenure of the heirs of Thomas le Meleward, 1 pence.

on tenorial ladders which extended down through sub-letting to the individuals who actually lived in the tenement.<sup>104</sup> The ownership of tenements placed Walter centrally within Bridgnorth, much like John Collyng, but unlike William de la Hulle, who also held property in Bridgnorth but included bequests to locations outside of the town. It is important to recognise, however, that, as mentioned above, Walter's testamentary evidence is his probate and details of other bequests could have been stipulated in his will or through patronage during his life time and not noted here.

This evidence of property bequests would however suggest that testators from Bridgnorth had comfortable surroundings and moderate capital, emphasising their status as the town's middling sort. There are other noticeable differences between these men. William left land and money, with the residue of his estate to pay off debts, and there is no reference to specific items. This may be because there were too many items to list and they may have been distributed before his death or their distribution was simply confirmed through an oral agreement.<sup>105</sup> John Collyng, however, appears to have lived in a moderate household, but still owning goods which would suggest a level of wealth and comfort. Amongst these were two incense boats which appeared to be of value as John specified them amongst all his 'goods and chattels' as a means to pay off his debts. Other than these items, John's will is then dedicated to bequests of land, which, as stated, he appeared to hold mostly in Bridgnorth and its immediate vicinity. Testamentary evidence from the ranks of the middling sort, as demonstrated by the bequests made by men and women, shows the range of personal items they regarded as important and valuable. In the case of Walter and William, there was no detailed reference to specific gifts.

### **Professional and personal provisions**

As already discussed, testators showed concern for their friends' and family's spiritual welfare, along with detailed accounts for the provisions to be made for their funeral and patronage to religious institutions. The care for their family, friends and servants follows similar concern for their own spiritual wellbeing and comfort. Wealthy members of the middling sort often remember their servants, even if they were no

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<sup>104</sup> See Chapter 4 for discussion on tenorial ladders.

<sup>105</sup> LLGC/NLW, Pitchford Hall (Ottley) Papers, deed 331, will of William de la Hulle.



longer in the testator's service, possibly because they may have lived with the family and, as seen in wills relating to women, could be close to the testator at the time of death, acting perhaps as a carer.

William de la Hulle remembered his former clerk, William de Neuport, who is called a *magister* in his will and was the first beneficiary mentioned in the will and addressed individually with a bequest from William.<sup>106</sup> William then addressed his family, the members of which each received land, with the greater portion inherited by his eldest son, Edmund. Provision of a tenement in Hungrey Street 'in which she lives' was left for his wife Mabel, who was also his first executrix, followed by their sons.<sup>107</sup> John Collyng also provided a living for his wife Annora with a life tenement in Mill Street, as discussed above.<sup>108</sup>

William de la Hulle only refers to his former clerk once but that does not mean that this position was below the middling sort. He would have been a peer to those studied here, for example. This demonstrates the breadth of occupations undertaken by those who resided in the ranks of Bridgnorth's middling sort and did not wholly rely on the market or property for their financial welfare. A clerk of Bridgnorth was of comparative wealth to Walter and John, which can be illustrated with the probate record of Robert ad Portam and property endeavours of John Canne of Bridgnorth, studied in the next chapter, who were both described as clerks. They were thus certainly in Bridgnorth's middling sort according to the criteria of this study. Evidence from Chester supports the status of clerks as residing in the middling sort and as wealthier members of the social order. Agnes, widow of Richard, clerk, formerly citizen of Chester and custodian of their daughter, is named with only the reference to her former husband's profession and status when acting as his executrix.<sup>109</sup> This demonstrates that the status of clerk was notable enough in the probate's description of Richard for his widow to be described as such without further names to identify him

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<sup>106</sup> LLGC/NLW, Pitchford Hall (Ottley) Papers, deed 331, will of William de la Hulle. The title of *magister* could refer to a man's Master's degree or to address other learned men. Although it should be noted that the use of the term "clerk" could imply he was a cleric.

<sup>107</sup> LLGC/NLW, Pitchford Hall (Ottley) Papers, deed 331. Barron and Sutton, *Medieval London Widows*, p. 22.

<sup>108</sup> LLGC/NLW, Pitchford Hall (Ottley) Papers, deed 89.

<sup>109</sup> LLGC/NLW, Pitchford Hall (Ottley) Papers, deed 348.

or her. This deed from Chester is dated 1325 and Robert ad Portam's probate is dated 1327, suggesting that the status of this position in the community of Bridgnorth would likely have been equivalent to the status of Richard in Chester and that clerks were of a noted social status. This is also supported by the bequest by William de la Hulle to his former clerk.

### **Status and wealth in the occupations of the middling sort**

Robert, William's clerk, is the only recipient of a bequest in the wills from Bridgnorth's men who was identified by occupation.<sup>110</sup> Despite the status that a clerk may have held in Bridgnorth as a member of the middling sort, Robert ad Portam chose not to be buried in the church or by an altar, but instead, like Walter Bagot, requested to be buried in the cemetery of St Leonard's.<sup>111</sup> However, unlike Walter and John, Robert stated what was to be done with his home and appeared not to have been married, as, unlike the case of William de la Hulle, his house was not left to the use of his wife,. Instead, Robert left his house to his brother, John, together with a tenement in Littlebridgnorth. The location of this tenement outside the town could be an indication of Robert's status, slightly above that of Walter, who only held property in the town. The property from Littlebridgnorth was purchased from Richard de Inquardin, *dominus* (chaplain), together with one acre in le Hokefield and another acre in a field in the middle of Bridgnorth near lands held by John Glidde and Robert de Bergham.<sup>112</sup> Despite having the title of a clerk, Robert ad Portam did partake in the property and livestock markets, which is not surprising given the rich wool trade in the area. He left 140 sheep and 35 lambs to his brother, John, demonstrating the strong agricultural link maintained by Bridgnorth and its inhabitants despite other noted occupations.

The disposal of one's property and assets was only possible due to the competency of the will's executor. In the remainder of this chapter we examine this

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<sup>110</sup> LLGC/NLW, Pitchford Hall (Ottley) Papers, deed 361, although William is called a merchant in 1340 when securing a bond of wool for £200. Margaret Yates' study of Western Berkshire shows probate records highlighting trading networks outside of the town with its environs, Yates, *Town and Countryside*, p. 120.

<sup>111</sup> LLGC/NLW, Pitchford Hall (Ottley) Papers, deed 137, probate of Robert ad Portam.

<sup>112</sup> LLGC/NLW, Pitchford Hall (Ottley) Papers, deed 137, probate of Robert ad Portam.

role and how this reflects the ideas of the middling sort and their family networks, in particular the role of wives and women.

### **Executing a will**

Testamentary evidence provides evidence of networks and relationships but here we turn to who was chosen to act as a will's executor. The role of executor often fell to the spouse, commonly the wife. Wives themselves rarely made wills and if they did, it was only with the consent of their husband.<sup>113</sup> Bridgnorth is typical in this respect where we find women taking an active role as executrix, as evidenced by property deeds in which women grant land and property as executrices of their husbands' wills. Christine de Pisan described the role of an executrix as:

Wanting to thoroughly understand the last will and testament of her husband and she will devote all her efforts to fulfilling his wishes as soon as possible in order to ease the blessed soul of the man she loved.<sup>114</sup>

Christine de Pisan's comment is more about the spirit in which the task should be undertaken than about the real experience of those, both men and women, chosen as executors. The role of executor could be long and onerous and incur expense, but it demonstrates a great deal of trust placed in those chosen to fulfil it.

The deeds from Bridgnorth demonstrate the normality of middling sort women acting as executrices as much as men of the same social standing. The role thus brought a form of equality within the middling sort of Bridgnorth. The diplomatic form of the deeds is the reason we see women act as executrices as it highlights a woman's widowed status due to her role as executrix. The deeds which mention executors in the following discussion are not wills or testamentary evidence as previously discussed. Instead we look at deeds which demonstrate the executor doing their duty, i.e. granting property on behalf of the testator or claiming back debts owed to the

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<sup>113</sup> Sheenan, 'The Influence of Canon Law', pp. 16-30; Beat Kumin, 'Late Medieval Churchwardens: Accounts and Parish Government Looking beyond London and Bristol', *The English Historical review*, 119, no. 480 (Feb 2004), pp. 87-99; Hanawalt, *Wealth of Wives*; Kermode, 'Merchants of Three Northern English Towns', pp. 7-38.

<sup>114</sup> Christine de Pisan, *The Treasure of the City of Ladies; or, The Book of the Three Virtues*, ed. and transl. by Sarah Lawson (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1985), p. 81.

deceased. This study of 685 deeds holds 67 which refer to women acting as executrices in comparison to 102 deeds which clearly describe men in this capacity.<sup>115</sup> The changing frequency of women's appearance as executrices is set out in Figure 6 below. The position of executrix saw women adopt legal duties and act under law in a way that would normally be denied to them.<sup>116</sup>

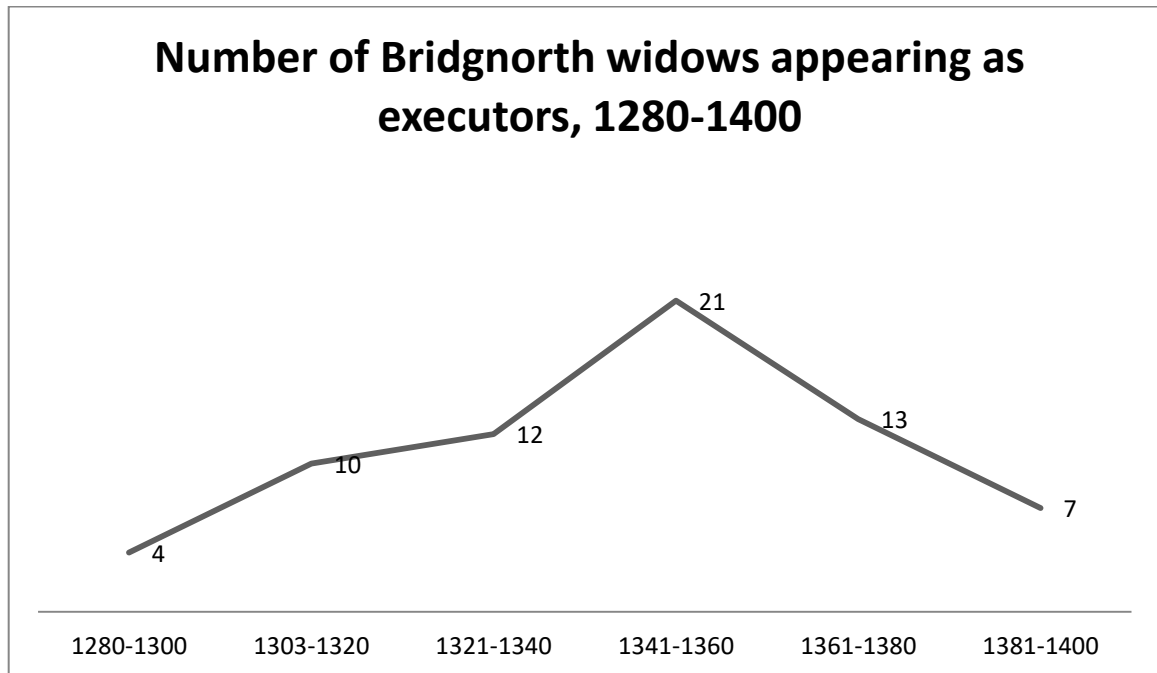


Figure 6 Number of Bridgnorth widows appearing as executrices in the study period<sup>117</sup>

### Executing a will and the law

Theory and practice of law, both Common and Canon, is complex and, in the execution of a will, the jurisdictions of royal and ecclesiastical courts would often overlap. As Henry Swinburne noted in the sixteenth century:

All the limes and bones of this my testamentary picture, were not only heretofore out of joint; but scattered and dispersed farre asunder, some amongst the laws civill, some amongst our provincial constitutions, and some amongst the laws, statutes, and customes of this Realme.<sup>118</sup>

<sup>115</sup> LLGC/NLW, Pitchford Hall (Ottley) Papers.

<sup>116</sup> Rowena Archer and B. E. Ferne, 'Testamentary Procedure with Special Reference to the Executrix', in Keith Bates, Anne Curry, Christopher Hardman, and Peter Noble (eds.), *Reading Medieval Studies*, 15 (1989), pp. 3-35.

<sup>117</sup> LLGC/NLW, Pitchford Hall (Ottley) Papers, SA, Mrs Dyas' Collection.

<sup>118</sup> H. Swinburne, *A Treatise of Testaments and Last Wills: Compiled out of the Laws Ecclesiastical, Civil, and Canon, as also out of the Common Law, Customs and Statutes of this Realm* (London: General Books, LLC, 1743), p. ii.

By the time of Swinburne's observations, the canonical will was accepted and the basic procedure of examination and enforcement had been established. By the end of the thirteenth century, in the second statute of Westminster, the representation of the testator by their executor was accepted. Indication of the Church's jurisdiction was evident by the end of the thirteenth century when wills were accepted and enforced as legally binding. Common law recognised executors and their duties, although tensions and problems between the courts remained to be solved and underlying theories and practical issues were established by the second Statute of Westminster (1285).<sup>119</sup>

It was here that women held an important role as executrix; as an executor's abilities grew under law, so too did their powers gain greater weight in court. Canon Law saw the development of the executors' role where control of wills fell increasingly under the ecclesiastical court's jurisdiction.<sup>120</sup> This is an interesting development in the study of women who, as evidenced in the writings of some clerical writers, were often regarded as untrustworthy compared to men. They were also unable to access the law without a man to act with or for them in some capacity in ecclesiastic records and royal courts. However, the Church led the way for women to enjoy an equal standing as men in a shared responsibility when fulfilling the requirements of a testator's wishes. This recognition of an executor's ability and status, irrespective of gender, gave women the opportunity to act in law. However, women were still required to appoint a man to act on their behalf as an attorney or court representative in order to access the law.<sup>121</sup> The need to appoint an attorney and thus obtain the assistance of a man demonstrates that women were still restricted under law and that

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<sup>119</sup> M. Sheenan, *The Will in Medieval England from the Conversion of the Anglo-Saxons to the End of the Thirteenth Century* (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 1963); T. F. T. Plunkett, *A Concise History of the Common Law*, 5<sup>th</sup> edn. (London: Liberty Fund Inc, 1956), pp. 725-46; W. S. Holsworth, *A History of English Law*, 12 vols (London: Little, Brown & Co, 1903-38), III (1909), pp. 534-9; F. Pollock and F. W. Maitland, *The History of English Law*, 2 vols., 2<sup>nd</sup> edn. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), II, pp. 314-63; John H. Baker, *An Introduction to English Legal History*, 4<sup>th</sup> ed. (London: Butterworths, 2002).

<sup>120</sup> Archer and Ferne, 'Testamentary Procedure', p. 22.

<sup>121</sup> CCR, V, p. 652, Johanna Pitchford appointing her son William to follow the debt owed to her husband. SA, Mrs Dyas' Collection, deed 796/9, dated 1351, Agnes relict of William Palmer appoints attorney. LLGC/NLW, Pitchford Hall (Ottley) Papers, deed 17, Alice Pitchford nee Rondulph having an attorney appointed on her behalf while executing her husband Edmund's will.

it was initially the role of an executor which was being recognised, rather than the person. That initial freedom of an executing role should not be heralded beyond its boundaries as there were exceptions to the limits of an executor's jurisdiction for both men and women due to the responsibility of the role as seen by the church.

Being an executor involved significant responsibility, with most testators choosing executors from family, friends and associates, indeed someone from their own network, which was of importance within the middling sort as identified in Chapter 1. In the market town of Bridgnorth, the connections of friends and business associates are apparent through the recurrence of families who frequently appeared in bequests and witness lists and meet the criteria of the 'middling sort' as laid out in the introduction.

The law might, in theory, restrict women when married, but husbands, it seems, could not be restricted in appointing their wives to act following their death. Despite widows being the obvious choice for men, three deeds from the collection specify unmarried daughters, mothers and sisters. An example of this is Agnes Rondulph, who was the executrix for her sister, Alice, Edmund Pitchford's widow, whose testamentary evidence is noted above. Further studies also demonstrate cases where testators looked to women with influence to act as their executrix, which indicates that, in some areas, status overrode gender.<sup>122</sup>

Under law, wives could not bequeath property as it was under the guardianship of their husband. Few wives made a will, as they would require their husband's permission to do so.<sup>123</sup> However, when widowed, they could make a will and appoint a female executrix such as Alice nee Rondulph did with her sister, Agnes. If they had adult children, these would however often be the first choice. Despite this, Johanna Pitchford, the wife of wealthy merchant Nicholas, who has been discussed in

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<sup>122</sup> Archer and Ferne, 'Testamentary Procedure', p. 5. This is mainly supported by examples from the nobility. LLGC/NLW, Pitchford Hall (Ottley) Papers, deed 305, dated 1299, William Westwode is described as the son of Margery. This identification unlike the 'son of' identification normally seen in these documents. This could be a scribal issue, as the other party in the deed is also described in this way with his mother named before his father, William son of Hawys and John de Aldebur. Evidence from Bridgnorth would suggest that status overrode gender. See Appendix 11.

<sup>123</sup> Sheenan, 'The Influence of Canon Law'.

previous chapters, chose a member of the clergy to act as her executor despite having adult sons at the time of her death.<sup>124</sup>

After the spouse, children, family friends and priests were common choices for the role of executor; such choices also reveal networks, both public and private, of the testator.<sup>125</sup> The order and reliability of the chosen executors could also demonstrate the testator's belief in the competence of those chosen. Wills open a window into the private preoccupations of medieval people and the execution of the testator's wishes reveals the serious and earnest faith they had in those they entrusted.<sup>126</sup> This was important for property and wealth, because commercial interests and profits needed to be protected. Merchants and those with business interests acknowledged their wives' competence in business when selecting them as executors, since wives were often the best people to entrust with the testator's soul and the integrity of children's inheritance.<sup>127</sup>

As noted, the wealthy Bridgnorth merchant Nicholas Pitchford demonstrated this when he appointed his wife, Johanna, as one of his executors. Nicholas and Johanna's son, Edmund, also chose his wife, Alice, as the executrix of his will.<sup>128</sup> Despite Johanna and Alice being chosen as executrices, the entire family assisted them in this task. Johanna required the assistance of her sons in the execution of Nicholas's will; the same was also true of Edmund's widow, Alice, who was assisted by her brother-in-law, Nicholas.

That a wealthy man like Nicholas chose his wife over a business partner shows a mutual trust in their relationship. Information regarding Nicholas Pitchford's death and bequests, including his Inquisition Post Mortem and will, has not been located, but there is evidence of his wishes from other records, which also cast light on a testator's attitudes to female executors. Records from the Close Rolls of Edward III,

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<sup>124</sup> Johanna chose Richard de Mughale as an executor of her will, although he died of plague before he could carry out her bequests. *CCR*, VIII, p. 192. Gordon and Marshall, 'The Place of the Dead'; Barron Burgess, *Memory and Commemoration*.

<sup>125</sup> J. Kermode, 'Sentiment and Survival', p. 12.

<sup>126</sup> Archer and Ferne, 'Testamentary Procedure', pp. 3-34.

<sup>127</sup> Kermode, 'Sentiment and Survival' shows evidence of this not always being the case; some husbands did not want their wives to be guardians for their children.

<sup>128</sup> LLGC/NLW, Pitchford Hall (Ottley) Papers, deed 236, Edmund's certificate of probate granting administration of his will to Alice.

dated 24<sup>th</sup> November, 1340, state Johanna's wish to have William de Pitchford, her son, and William de Bobynton act as Nicolas's executor for her.<sup>129</sup> This is the first incident where Johanna is identified as an executrix, but here she was required to relinquish her role in order to prosecute the execution of a recognisance for £160 made to Nicholas in Chancery by Reginald de Conduit, citizen of London.<sup>130</sup> Despite Johanna appearing to release her executing duties to her son, William, he then sought further assistance in the case of recovering debt against Reginald de Conduit. What is unclear in this case is whether or not Johanna completely handed over her position of executrix or simply for one instance in order to manage this debt.<sup>131</sup>

Although it is not stated in the record, Johanna could have continued her duties as a co-executrix or overseer of her husband's will. The available evidence for this case ends here, but does highlight the sum of money, £160, Nicholas could afford to loan and the locations in which he did business, as well as his original choice of executors.<sup>132</sup> Johanna Pitchford's absence in the deeds as executrix of her husband's will is as telling as her actions when undertaking her duties. Further evidence relating to the execution of Nicholas Pitchford's will, dated June 1344, show Nicholas's sons, Nicholas and William, claim a writ of allowance which was granted to their father for trading wool through the Port of London. In this deed, they are both referred to as his executors whilst Johanna was not recorded in the deed.<sup>133</sup>

A series of claims for allowances all made on the same day in January 1344 saw five of the seven claimed allowances made by widows acting as executors for their husbands and one as a co-executrix alongside her son.<sup>134</sup> This suggests that claiming an allowance in such a manner was not a situation where women required a man's

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<sup>129</sup> CCR, V, pp. 652, 83. Reginald de Conduit served as Mayor of London 1338-1340 and played an important role in the estate of merchants. Barron, *London in the Later Middle Ages*, p. 329.

<sup>130</sup> CCR, V, pp. 652, 83. Barron, *London in the Later Middle Ages*, p. 329.

<sup>131</sup> CCR, V, p. 652.

<sup>132</sup> Nicholas sold wool from London Port and the list of allowances included Reginald de Conduit as a wool seller. See Chapter 2 for Nicholas Pitchford's and Reginald De Conduit's connections in the trade and merchant circle.

<sup>133</sup> CCR, VII, p. 401.

<sup>134</sup> CCR, VII, pp. 399-401. Collectors at the Port in Boston received allowance claims from Margery, widow of John de Thornton Copperdale; Margery, widow of John de Chesterton; Joan, widow of William son of Thomas; Margaret, widow of Walter de Scotelthorp; and Cecily, widow of John de Stonton. These widows claimed allowances alongside the other executors of their husbands' wills and are the first named as executors. Joan, widow of John de Fraunketon, is a co-executor with her son.



assistance; however, the allowance relating to Nicholas Pitchford was for the Port of London and the above are taken from allowances granted for the port in Boston which may have accounted for widows being able to make claims themselves.<sup>135</sup> Despite Johanna appearing to release her executing duties to her sons, the evidence does reveal cases of female executors claiming allowance.

### **Problems of executing a will**

The practice of executing a will could be an onerous one, taking several years for a testator's wishes to be carried out.<sup>136</sup> The wardship of minors, for example, would have lasted a number of years with ongoing responsibilities and financial care.<sup>137</sup> The Bridgnorth deeds reveal widows acting as executors for a period of five to seven years, during which time they are given the title 'widow of'.<sup>138</sup> Likewise, men are also noted in the deeds as acting as an executor and in a five- to seven-year period after the testator's death.

This evidence could suggest that it was a practice for bequests to be administered during this five- to seven-year period and that it was the appointed time in which to describe yourself as a widow or for society to address you as such. Over the period of five- to seven years, many changes and setbacks could occur which would prevent executors from completing their duties. Such cases are not unknown and reasons for this could vary from an executor's own financial problems or a lack of funds left by the testator or even the death of the executor; in such cases, administration would be passed to another party.<sup>139</sup> In the case of Johanna Pitchford, the Patent Rolls from 1348 state that her executors were Richard de Mughale and John Dugel, chaplains, and John de Longe.<sup>140</sup> These men had to pay £10 to the king for

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<sup>135</sup> CCR, VII, p. 401. It can only be suggested that, as in the case of Reginald de Conduit, the claims were made for London, whose procedural policies differed and prevented wives from making these claims. It was also conducted through the Society of the Merchants of the Realm which could also have prevented wives from pursuing the claim themselves.

<sup>136</sup> Daniell, *Death and Burial*.

<sup>137</sup> Barbara Hanawalt, *Growing Up in Medieval London: The Experience of Childhood in History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995); Elaine Clark, 'City and Custody Laws in Medieval England', in *The American Journal of Legal History*, 34 (April 1990), pp. 182-193.

<sup>138</sup> LLGC/NLW, Pitchford Hall (Ottley) Papers, deed 257, Johanna Pitchford; deed, 1289, Alice Rondulph. Both granted land within this period. Deed 1289, Margery Dunfoull, widow of John, granting land from c. 1300-1306.

<sup>139</sup> Archer and Ferne, 'Testamentary Procedure', p. 17, n. 82.

<sup>140</sup> CPR, IX, p. 192.

alienation in mortmain of 5 marks each of rent in Bridgnorth to a chaplain in order to celebrate a daily divine service in St Leonard's church for the souls of Nicholas, Johanna's husband, Johanna herself and their ancestors.<sup>141</sup> However, the executors did not fulfil this wish, as they died of plague. This is evidenced by a writ asking the sheriff of Shropshire to make an inquisition and certify the deaths of the executors.<sup>142</sup> This inquisition was carried out and confirmed that Richard de Mughale, John Dugel and John de Longe had indeed died in this way and all within the same year.<sup>143</sup> It is interesting to note that one of Johanna's executors, Richard de Mughale, was part of her son Edmund's business network as Edmund let tenements from Richard in Bridgnorth.

This brief discussion of a will's execution and those who performed this duty has brought another area of the middling sort's lives in Bridgnorth into view. Here we see the names of the same families and their associates appear, which emphasises the evidence laid out in the previous chapters of who Bridgnorth's middling sort were and how their personal and business networks were connected.

## Conclusion

Regardless of wealth, position and gender in Bridgnorth's middling sort, common themes are clear throughout testamentary evidence of William de la Hulle, John Collyng, Walter Bagot, and Alice Rondulph as is the standardised format which bequests and wishes took. The importance of the spiritual welfare of the testator was paramount and adhered to through provisions made for the churches in Bridgnorth in accordance to personal wealth. Details of place of burial and funeral arrangements illustrate the same beliefs, but provisions for these were in accordance to one's wealth. Clive Burgess noted that the death of someone moderately wealthy in the middling sort (not in possession of the wealth e.g. William de la Hulle held), would still have been a significant moment for the parish.<sup>144</sup> However, he also noted that individuals might combine a number of practices, as outlined above, to emphasise one aspect of the current trends over another, which reflected their taste, needs and

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<sup>141</sup> *CPR*, IX, p. 192.

<sup>142</sup> *CPR*, IX, p. 69.

<sup>143</sup> *CPR*, IX, p. 69. Richard de Mughale on Tuesday after St. Peter's Chair, John Dugel on Friday after Passion Sunday and John de Longe on Thursday after the Invention of the Holy Cross.

<sup>144</sup> Burgess, 'By Quick and by Dead', p. 841.

means.<sup>145</sup> Bequests show the manner by which the middling sort displayed their wealth in their community in ways previously only done by the gentry. A person's networks and the active association of townspeople with their rural hinterland can be seen through maintenance of highways and bridges but also through their social and religious ties. Testamentary evidence reflects this through the benefaction to religious houses and the surrounding countryside where important social networks were maintained through bequests.

Kate Kelsey Staples notes that wills from London show that occupation and social status had more influence than gender when determining bequests, indicating that socio-economic status was of more importance and shaped the contents of the will.<sup>146</sup> A middling sort merchant with personal wealth had important choices to make for the devolution of their real estate and moveable goods; just as a member of the nobility might well use their will to pass on real estate to heirs, a middling sort merchant could just as likely bequeath property to a business associate.<sup>147</sup> Women were less likely to pass on property in the same manner and their wills included more women. Staples suggests this may have been due to the fact women recognised that a moveable legacy would have been of more use to women than men. The importance of moveable goods highlights areas of domestic space, reflecting the diverse items people regarded as valuable. Household items also act as indicators of social status and provided an insight into a middling sort woman's standard of living and the structure of her household.

The role women played in executing a will demonstrates that their role was not always restricted to the domestic sphere, but that they did have capabilities in administration and law. Women were not seen by their families or associates as having limitations; instead these limitations were placed upon them by the law. This reveals that, as elsewhere, the experience of middling sort women in Bridgnorth was not wholly one of patriarchal dominance in their daily lives; instead, the regard they had from personal relationships was balanced and trusting, indicating that the reality

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<sup>145</sup> Burgess, 'By Quick and by Dead', p. 841.

<sup>146</sup> Staples, *Daughters of London*, p. 70.

<sup>147</sup> Staples, *Daughters of London*, p. 70.

of women's lives was not always as restricted as contemporary literature may have suggested.

The limited records included in this study reflect beliefs seen in other communities across England, as noted in studies by Jenny Kermode and Kate Kelsey Staples and witnessed through the practices of Bridgnorth's middling sort.<sup>148</sup> These records offer an important insight into the concerns, thoughts and perceptions of members of Bridgnorth's community and its social networks.

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<sup>148</sup> Kermode, *Medieval Merchants*, p. 152.

## CHAPTER 4: BRIDGNORTH'S URBANISATION

### Introduction

The growth of market towns and the urbanisation of Britain throughout the medieval period have been studied through the investigation of features such as developing government, legal administration and trade, as well as the physical nature of the changing landscape. Historians such as Helen Cam, Frederick Tout, Frederick Maitland and James Tait all contributed at a very early stage to such work through their seminal studies.<sup>1</sup> These studies demonstrate the establishment of local government and the formation of a national administrative system with a formalised township.<sup>2</sup> Cam developed approaches to the use of local sources and government records, in order to discover a closer relationship between people and place.<sup>3</sup> Cam studied systems of local government which were established by the King and enforced in the localities. Cam provides an overview of local administrative bodies and articles which explain the function of the roles. She also discusses the evolution of records in relation to the administration of counties and local government.<sup>4</sup> Maitland's work on the development of the English borough and the constitution of medieval England discussed the structure of town society and developed an understanding of the social orders among which the middling sort found themselves.<sup>5</sup> Tout's research into legal and administrative systems of government in medieval history studied the ruling doctrine of the country in the immediate period before this study.

Tait charted the introduction of the borough by Alfred the Great and its developments until the rule of Henry III in 1227. He explains the term "borough" and its meaning when used by historians, comparing differences between large towns and

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<sup>1</sup> Frederick Maitland, *The Constitutional History of England: A Series of Lectures* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1908); Tout, *Chapters in the Administrative History*; Helen M. Cam, *Liberties and Communities in Medieval England: Collected Studies in Local Administration and Topography*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (London: Merlin Press, 1963); James Tait, *The Medieval English Borough: Studies in its Origins and Constitution History*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1968).

<sup>2</sup> Helen M. Cam, *The Hundred and the Hundred Rolls: An Outline of Local Government in Medieval England* (London: Methuen and Co, 1930).

<sup>3</sup> Cam, *Liberties and Communities*.

<sup>4</sup> Cam, *The Hundred and the Hundred Rolls*.

<sup>5</sup> Frederick Maitland, *Township and Borough: Being the Ford Lectures Delivered in the University of Oxford* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1898); *Charters of the Borough of Cambridge* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1901); *A Sketch of English Legal History* (London: G.P. Putnam's sons, 1915); 'Canon Law in England', *The English Historical Review*, 12 (1987), pp. 233-258.

smaller boroughs which existed from 1066.<sup>6</sup> Tait offers a valuable description of urban foundations while establishing a topographical demography to provide further understanding of the development of settlements. This is of direct relevance to this chapter, in which topographic evidence is used to demonstrate the evolution of Bridgnorth's development.<sup>7</sup>

Interest in urban centres and the multifaceted functions of towns' social and political groups has increased over the last thirty years. This has encouraged a deeper understanding of the groups who lived there through factors such as trade routes to market towns and the effect this had on the people who lived there. A seminal work covering these topics is the *Cambridge Urban History*, and in particular parts II and III, volume 1, which provides a systematic investigation into the evolution of British towns, including themes such as power and authority, society and its population, and economy.<sup>8</sup> The research establishes the interrelationship of social groups and classes who comprised the urban population and their participation within a wider region and state, alongside the development of settlements and the slow urbanisation within the British Isles.<sup>9</sup>

This chapter examines the growth of market towns on Norman England's western frontiers, here studied through Bridgnorth, which has been mapped by Keith Lilley and discussed further below.<sup>10</sup> Lilley has produced detailed mapping of a market town's formation onto the townscape we recognise today which draws particular attention to its morphological characteristics. Lilley charts the built form of a medieval market town through its planning and design using Bridgnorth as an example. He charts its development through three phases, covering institutional ruling, commercial growth and formal urban planning. From these three phases, the unique township landscape emerged. These three phases also demonstrate the personal development of individuals within the town and their changing dynamics in status and power. We

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<sup>6</sup> Tait, *Medieval English Borough*; David Carpenter, *The Reign of Henry III* (London: Hambledon Press, 1996), p. 105.

<sup>7</sup> Tait, *Medieval English Borough*.

<sup>8</sup> Peter Clark and D. M. Palliser (eds), *The Cambridge Urban History of Britain* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), I.

<sup>9</sup> Clark and Palliser, *Cambridge Urban History*, p. 3.

<sup>10</sup> Keith Lilley, *Urban Life in the Middle Ages 1000-1450* (Hampshire: Palgrave, 2002).

focus here specifically on the middling sort and how their economic growth reflected in their physical surroundings, buildings and land holdings.<sup>11</sup>

The physical transformation of Bridgnorth has been included in another recent study of the area of Bridgnorth, carried out by Jane Croom. Croom undertook a topographical analysis of south-east Shropshire and the hinterlands of Much Wenlock and Bridgnorth.<sup>12</sup> Her aim was to provide a framework of major roads and fields, noting local alterations and piecemeal additions which may have changed the conformity of the formalised planning noted by Lilley. Croom notes the decreasing size of plots through the town's development as the population grew and space became more competitive, especially in the areas associated with the market, during the thirteenth century.

The urbanisation of Bridgnorth is defined in this study period (1280-1400) through the rise in deeds relating to its property market and the type of land transferred throughout the fourteenth century.<sup>13</sup> This is noticeable within the deeds through a number of factors. One factor, evident as the fourteenth century progressed, was the change in the type of land and property transferred, demonstrating growth of a formalised township through the development of market streets and tenement housing. This is in noticeable contrast to earlier deeds of transfers which mainly focused on land in the environs of Bridgnorth and were not town-based. The second factor was the rise in complex landholdings over simple ones, which increased due to the nature of new property types, as previously stated. Both developments will be discussed more fully below.

The deeds from Bridgnorth are concerned with freehold land. The terms of agreement of these *inter vivos* transfers detail the names of active parties; the type of land, such as arable, meadow, woods, pasture etc.; the number of messuages; their location; and whether land should be kept within the family through inheritance.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Lilley, *Urban Life*, p. 140.

<sup>12</sup> J. N. Croom, 'The Topographical Analysis of Medieval Town Plans: The Examples of Much Wenlock and Bridgnorth', *Midland History*, 17 (1992), pp. 16-38.

<sup>13</sup> See Introduction for details of deed collection.

<sup>14</sup> LLGC/NLW, Pitchford Hall (Ottley) Papers, deed 57, John Rondulph granting land to Edmund Pitchford and John's daughter, Alice, prior to their marriage, which would suggest fee tailing. This deed and the subject of family land is discussed further below.

Changes such as these were noted in Margaret Yates's study of the Feet Fines in western Berkshire, which charted the social, geographic and chronological changes through the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. These changes include the size of property, number of holdings and changing land values, alongside the evolving social status of landlords over the two centuries.<sup>15</sup> Yates concluded that the transfer of free land and the developing property market in Berkshire followed national trends including, of course, the crises which swept across the country. Through comparative studies, such as the present study of Bridgnorth, the success and evolving social structure of the towns' people, their wealth and town development, in terms of land transfer, can be placed in a wider national context.

The evidence of a growing formality of the town contributes to the evolving identity and image of a market town and its inhabitants. This urbanisation of Bridgnorth is recorded in the deeds through the increase of leases, releases of property, and grants focusing more on tenements and less so on land in the outlying vicinity as the fourteenth century progressed.<sup>16</sup> This current study includes 685 deeds relating to land and property transactions, witnessing a steady increase in the number peaking in the 1340s before waning after 1360, as discussed in the introduction. This evidence coincides with the increase of written documents and landlords wishing for grants to be written down and formalised, producing more documentary evidence, although some transfers may still have been made as an oral agreement.<sup>17</sup> The increase of transactions also coincided with a rise in the more formulaic scribal practices of the fourteenth century, which appeared to focus on the transfer of property between parties and not the inclusion of a consideration fee and other superfluities of previous deeds. It is of note that the increase of documents was also due to the increase of a holdings' sub-division, which a landlord would wish to document when holding more than one property.

The importance of the formal deed is yet another indicator of the stable governance which established itself in the localities and was reflected in the formal

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<sup>15</sup> Margaret Yates, 'The market and Freehold land, 1300-1509: The Evidence of Feet Fines', *Economic History Review*, 66, issue 3 (2013), pp. 579-600.

<sup>16</sup> LLGC/NLW, Pitchford Hall (Ottley) Papers; SA, Mrs Dyas' collection. See Introduction, Figure 1.

<sup>17</sup> Goddard, *Lordship and Medieval Urbanisation*, p. 234.



planning of the physical environment of the town the deeds originated from. The diplomatic of the deed also demonstrates the commonality of property transactions, as they represent how property was an accessible means of finance to the middling sort. The increase and decrease of property transfers is illustrated in Figure 7 below, which conveys the rise in property transactions through the first half of this study period with a decline in the latter.

The early growth of land transfers coincided with the growing consumer habits of the prosperous middling sort who resided and maintained businesses in the town.<sup>18</sup> However, the decline in land transfers which followed the middle decades of the fourteenth century does not necessarily indicate that the urbanisation of Bridgnorth stopped or that land was no longer available for transfer, but rather shows that the town felt the effects of plague following its outbreak. Despite a decline in the number of transfers, it is of note that the transfers did not disappear and that the market town survived the outbreak and maintained a property economy, as discussed by Maurice Beresford and Christopher Dyer.<sup>19</sup> Figure 7 below illustrates the decline in transfers in ratio to each other at a fairly consistent rate.

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<sup>18</sup> Hatcher and Miller, *Medieval England* (London: Longman, 1995), p. 228. See Introduction for criteria of Bridgnorth's middling sort.

<sup>19</sup> Christopher Dyer, *Deserted Villages Revisited* (Hatfield: University of Hertfordshire Press, 2010); Maurice Beresford, *The Lost Villages of England* (London: Lutterworth press, 1998).

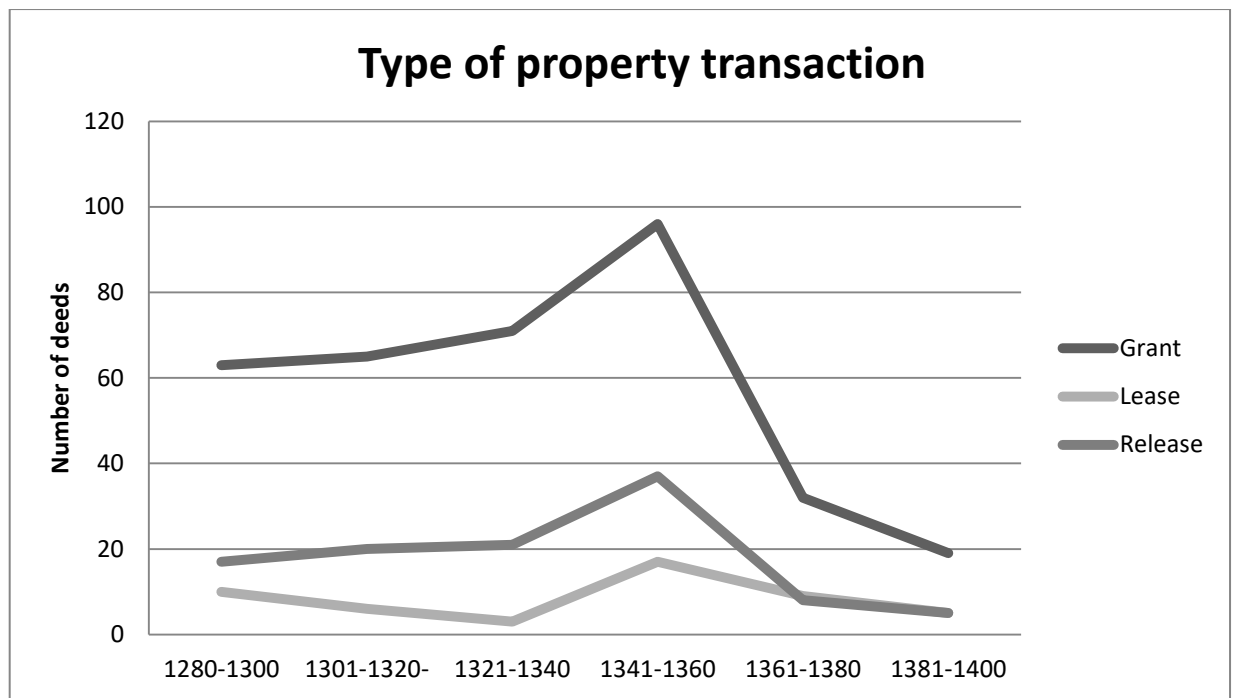


Figure 7 The types of property transfers<sup>20</sup>

The increase in deeds relating to mid fourteenth century Bridgnorth reflects a period where land in the town was increasingly granted and leased due to the development of tenements, which allowed for the subdivision of a holding. The result of this was the creation of numerous grants and leases for a single property, alongside a landlords' other holdings located within Bridgnorth's environs and outside of the main township.

In order to fully appreciate the changes to Bridgnorth's township the chapter focuses on the urbanisation of Britain in the later middle ages, which can be, in part, attributed to the growth of the middling sort in the localities. Urbanisation impacted on the middling sort's status and their living environment. This is reflected through the impact of urban expansion, which transformed rural economies, to their benefit.<sup>21</sup> Following a discussion of the growth of Bridgnorth and its transformation from a castle town to a market town, this study focuses on how the development of tenements enabled the wealthy middling sort to become landlords. The middling sort became landlords but also sub-tenants, who in turn took rents from tenants, due to the changing forms of property available to them. This social structure of Bridgnorth

<sup>20</sup> LLGC/NLW, Pitchford Hall (Ottley) Papers; SA, Mrs Dyas' Collection.

<sup>21</sup> Matthew Stevens, *Urban Assimilation*.

can be represented through a tenurial ladder. Below, Edmund Pitchford's tenurial ladder is discussed as a case study, illustrating the social structure of the town and to some degree the distribution of the townspeople's wealth. The wealthiest members of Bridgnorth owned the tenements and those further down the social order let and sub-let from them. This could continue for a number of degrees until those who lived in them were the poorest, and did not sub-let further.

The location of properties and who may have lived in different areas are noted in accordance to their identity and status. The rising middling sort are likely to have lived in what can be described as suburbs while building their property portfolio in the town. This is illustrated by the case study of John Canne below, who also demonstrates the theme of gentry emulation, specifically the middling sort's attempts to establish an "urban estate" in place of the landed estate the gentry held. Property accumulations are also noted with reference to the property habits of the Pitchford family and Fremund Erditon. The property habits of the middling sort, as identified in this study's introduction, can be seen through the assortment of land and property landlords held, from tenements to orchards and fields outside of the town, emphasising the rural setting of this small town. It is important to note that despite the growth of tenements, townspeople did not focus solely on urban dwellings, as they also demonstrated their status through the surrounding countryside and connections to landed estates and the lower gentry. The success of the area's cloth and wool trade, as discussed in Chapter 1, played a role in the middling sort's identity from the resources away from their town based property. This is further established through evidence outlining their concern for local resources. The resources were shared by the religious houses of the town and this chapter discusses the church's presence in Bridgnorth and the prominence it had in the property activities of the middling sort. As the previous chapter has shown, the middling sort was keen to be seen to be creating bonds with religious institutions of the town to demonstrate their piety.

## **Bridgnorth's agricultural past**

Throughout the period covered by this study, Bridgnorth's townspeople maintained the agricultural or rural element of their identity, as the continued sale and transfer of arable land shows in Figure 8 below and discussed further below. The inhabitants of Bridgnorth and its environs embraced the growing property market and commerce, while continuing to engage in agriculture, as evidenced by the crops held by John Rondulph in 1350 and the orchard of John Canne. This is not wholly surprising due to the size of Bridgnorth and its large rural hinterland. As the town developed into a market town, the people did not, and indeed could not, ignore the agricultural importance of their heritage. This is most noticeable in early deeds such as one dated 1300, where a grant between Roger de Torperlegh and his son, Thomas, identified several areas of land but also fields which were to include crops.<sup>22</sup> Roger granted a fee farm and five selions with the crop from one of the selions, as well as crops growing in half selions near land owned by the grantor.<sup>23</sup> Another example dated 1295 saw Annis, widow of Roger Cheote, lease with the assent of her son, Roger, four crops of land previously owned by Annis in fields outside Bridgnorth opposite Quatford.<sup>24</sup> Earlier still and slightly before this study period, in 1269, Roger, son of Henry of Bridgnorth, leased to William Canne three crops in consideration for 48s., as well as various other areas of land, which are difficult to locate and map.<sup>25</sup> These examples demonstrate the agricultural nature of Bridgnorth's environs, which continued to contribute to the town's identity and economy as it grew and developed tenements.

This transition is most noticeable in Figure 8 below, which highlights the shift of the townspeople's focus from outlying arable land and the manner it was used, to the rise in transfers for tenements. The spike in all types of land transfers occurs in the middle decades of the fourteenth century, from 1340-1360, as previously discussed. Here, we see that it was not just transfers of tenements which increased but, but transfers in all areas, as transfers of land in outlying fields also increased. This could mean that speculative entrepreneurs of the town looked ahead to investments with the intention of buying into the developing areas. It is interesting to note that the

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<sup>22</sup> LLGC/NLW, Pitchford Hall (Ottley) Papers, deed 312.

<sup>23</sup> LLGC/NLW, Pitchford Hall (Ottley) Papers, deed 312.

<sup>24</sup> LLGC/NLW, Pitchford Hall (Ottley) Papers, deed 1354.

<sup>25</sup> LLGC/NLW, Pitchford Hall (Ottley) Papers, deed 1227.

number of arable areas transferred appear consistent from the opening phase of the study but do not appear in surviving deeds after 1360, although it cannot be imagined that they ceased altogether. Bridgnorth was developing into a market town with a clear market centre, which is evident through the names of the streets which appeared at this time and discussed further below. Nevertheless, the number of transfers related to arable land is in tandem with the number of buildings which were specifically named as a house or a shop. Transactions for tenements greatly outnumber the transactions for arable land or houses and shops. This shows that the townspeople were developing the town and the property market. Therefore, Bridgnorth's property market was being built on its heritage of arable production despite the boom in tenements and land available in new streets, the developing market and specified shop/dwellings. These properties, purpose-built shops, had yet to become a staple of the town's output, as only few of the transfers specify the use of a town building as a house or shop. This is not to say that the town-based properties transferred were never used for such purposes, but merely that the deeds did not state this.

The evidence within the deeds details the development of the market focus and complements the evidence of Bridgnorth's physical changes as seen in Maps 1 and 2 and discussed further below. It has also been noted by Jane Croom that the physical evidence of the town's remains shows that by the late thirteenth century, there were buildings and plots of land within the walls of Bridgnorth's Castle, most noticeably the outer bailey.<sup>26</sup> But as shown in Figure 8 below, there are no notifications of this in the surviving deeds from the 1360s onwards.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> Croom, 'Topographical Analysis'.

<sup>27</sup> LLGC/NLW, Pitchford Hall (Ottley) Papers, deeds, 444, 499, 525, and 1345.

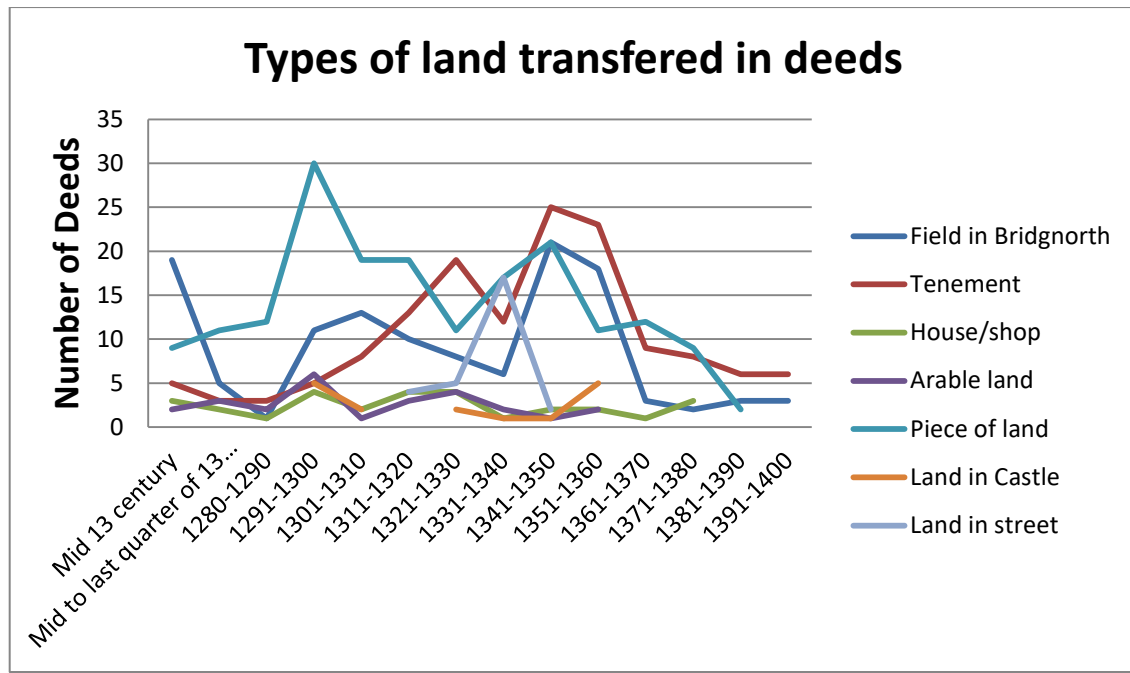


Figure 8 Types of land transferred in deeds<sup>28</sup>

## The changing social structure

The effect of the townspeople's shifting focus on the social structure of Bridgnorth is noticeable in the composition of its main landowners' social status, which changed over the fourteenth century to incorporate the newly prospering middling sort, as identified in the introduction.

The people of Bridgnorth, who can be traced in the deeds and represent the changing identity of the town and its inhabitants, also represent the changes to its physical development. Transfers conducted by families from the early decades of the study, c. 1280-1310, often refer to land in the *vill* of Bridgnorth, a description which declined in later deeds where Bridgnorth is predominantly referred to as *Brugge* or 'borough'. Dyer suggests a *vill* was a term used by Latin scribes, whereas the inhabitants might call it a 'town'. This was despite a township being in turn characterised as an individual village/town located within a larger manor or parish.<sup>29</sup> Bridgnorth was in any case a Royal peculiar and not a manor, which is described further in appendix 9.<sup>30</sup> The character of the town could be said to gain status when it

<sup>28</sup> LLGC/NLW, Pitchford Hall (Ottley) Papers; SA, Mrs Dyas' collection.

<sup>29</sup> Christopher Dyer, 'The English Medieval Village Community', pp. 407-429; Cam, *Liberties and Community*.

<sup>30</sup> See Appendix 9 for discussion on Bridgnorth as a royal peculiar.

was granted borough status by charter in 1102 by King Henry I.<sup>31</sup> The deeds appear to reflect this as the study period progresses, suggesting the town had reached a point of development which was better suited to identification by name only and not supported by the term *vill*.<sup>32</sup> This could be a change in the diplomatic format of the deeds, but also a change by those making the grants and how they saw their surroundings through the passing years and subsequent town development

Aside from descriptions of the town, either by the scribes or the townspeople themselves, the growth of Bridgnorth can also be seen in the common descriptions of land and property as they appear in the deeds. A frequent measure featured in the deeds was a 'messuage' (*mesuagium*), where cases of properties described as half messuages offer a relative indicator of plot size, although this is never exact. A messuage could relate to a plot with a house or outbuildings and occasionally appurtenances of land apportioned with it. The term usually applied to a plot of land on which a residence stood. Plot sizes are discussed further below.<sup>33</sup> These descriptions are useful indicators of how the areas developed through the study period and how they changed from crofts and fee farms to be dominated by tenements in the main streets. Such information alone does not provide a complete understanding of the town's landscape, but it can be a starting point to understand Bridgnorth's development when employed with a topographical view.<sup>34</sup> This topographical element enhances our understanding of the social and economic effects on the town's development and establishes the physical environment of the town and the living conditions, space and wealth that growth brought to the town's middling sort and their rising social status.

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<sup>31</sup> D. C. Cox, J. R. Edwards, R. C. Hill, Ann J. Kettle, R. Perren, Trevor Rowley, and P. A. Stamper, 'Domesday Book: 1300-1540', in G. C. Baugh and C. R. Erlington (eds.), *A History of the County of Shropshire: Volume 4, Agriculture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989), pp. 72-118, *British History Online* <<http://www.british-history.ac.uk/vch/shrop/vol4/pp72-118#anchorn54>> (accessed 12/09/2019).

<sup>32</sup> The Corbet family held a barony within the marcher lordship of Roger de Montgomery. The senior line died out, but cadet branches of the family survived. They are associated with Acton Burnell in southeast Shrewsbury. Augusta Elizabeth Brickdale, *Corbet: The Family of Corbet: Its Life and Times*, vol 2 (Hard Press: London, 1915).

<sup>33</sup> Derek Keene, *Survey of Medieval Winchester*.

<sup>34</sup> Croom, 'Topographical Analysis'.

## **From castle town to market town**

The changes of the town and its social structure came about in the fourteenth century and can be seen through the town's evolution from a castle town to a market town. This begins, as noted above, with the shifting location of the land transferred, as documented in the deeds. The land described in earlier deeds was often located outside Bridgnorth, suggesting it could be part of an estate or area from landed property, or inside the town, in or near the castle grounds. The castle was the focal point of Bridgnorth's development; located in the original part of the town and mentioned in a grant from Roger Bonamy to Fremund Erdinton of a messuage in the castle of Bridgnorth, complementing the identity of Bridgnorth as a castle town, which grew from the castle outwards, as described by Lilley.<sup>35</sup> Lilley described its development as consistent with the development of castle towns and Croom mapped the size and style of plots through a topographical survey. The importance of their studies for the town's identity suggests that by the thirteenth century, there were already plots and buildings in the castle grounds and, by the fourteenth century, residences of the burgesses had been established there.<sup>36</sup>

Bridgnorth's development from a castle town, as charted by Lilley, shows the formation of Bridgnorth from the castle's foundation, c. 1080, through to what he described as the 'formal' planning of the town in the late twelfth century and its new districts which became monopolised by the middling sort.<sup>37</sup> Roger de Belleme is credited with establishing the castle in Bridgnorth and he honoured his allegiance to the king by reinforcing the frontier border of the Marches, imposing authority and attracting settlers through the new market and burgage plots. This brought early signs of Bridgnorth's identity as a market town, evolving from a castle town through the introduction of burgage plots which were commonly associated with markets. Burgage plots were originally located at the gates of an abbey or castle, the area

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<sup>35</sup> LLGC/NLW, Pitchford Hall (Ottley) Papers, deed 497, dated 1297, Roger Bonamy grants to Fremund Erdinton a messuage extending from the castle walls to the highway. Further property accumulations of Fremund are discussed below. Lilley, *Urban Life*.

<sup>36</sup> CCR, III, p. 215; J. N. Croom, *The Pre-Medieval Human Landscape and Settlement Patterns of South-East Shropshire* (unpublished PhD thesis, University of Birmingham, 1989), pp. 326-9.

<sup>37</sup> Lilley, *Urban Life*, p. 142.



which established Bridgnorth's growth and under property law, known as burgage tenure, could be freely divided.<sup>38</sup>

As plots were not monopolised by landed or gentry families, it was not only the physical changes of the town that were important, but also the status of those it attracted due to these changes. Burgage tenure was derived from borough status and a basic borough liberty was associated with it, which demonstrates the evolving nature of land holding in the town.<sup>39</sup> When discussing burgage tenure, Stephen Rigby suggests that by its very nature, burgage tenure played an essential role in enabling a town's economic self-improvement due to the freedom and security which burgage plots allowed.<sup>40</sup> Rigby further notes that tenements offered fairly low rents which were relatively free to transfer by sale, bequest or gift, thereby stimulating urban investment and, potentially, town growth.<sup>41</sup> This growth meant an ability to mortgage, sell land or accrue property, essentially to dispose of one's property freely, resulting from borough liberties laying the basis for urban development.<sup>42</sup> A basic definition of a tenement was, in this context, a property which could be used for all forms of proprietorship and could be a dwelling place that would lend itself to be portioned up as apartments for rental purposes.<sup>43</sup> This brought with it greater opportunity for more townspeople to involve themselves in the land market of the town.

The development of Bridgnorth demonstrates the middling sort making use of tenements in this way. We see the development of tenements moving from the castle grounds outwards to the streets as the study period progressed. Land granted in the early deeds of the study period was predominantly focused outside the town and tenements were only seen within the grounds of the castle. As noted above a grant from Annis, widow of Nicholas Broune, to Fremund Erdinton in 1299 included a fee farm in a tenement of the castle of Bridgnorth. Henry, son of Henry de Castro, granted

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<sup>38</sup> Croom, 'Topographic Analysis', p. 22; Matte, *Women in Medieval Society*, p. 91.

<sup>39</sup> Rigby, *English Society*, p. 160.

<sup>40</sup> Rigby, *English Society*, p. 160. Burgage privileges varied across England in part due to the extent of a town's self-governance, as in some towns, burgesses sought to control their own interests.

<sup>41</sup> Rigby, *English Society*, p. 160.

<sup>42</sup> Rigby, *English Society*, p. 160.

<sup>43</sup> *Oxford English Dictionary Online*, s.v. 'tenement', <https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/tenement> (accessed on 10/09/2019).

to the same Fremund a messuage in the castle in 1300.<sup>44</sup> The land and tenements in the castle would have been available once it was no longer used as a military base and only those families in the area with the appropriate funds and connections would have had access to purchase it. It is understandable then that this is an area of the town which appears in the early phase of the study before the formalised streets appeared. As we see the building of Bridgnorth expand from the castle, the number of plots and tenements within it would always remain the same, so we never see more than five transactions of plots and tenements in the castle in any decade. This is noticeable when compared to the increase and development of tenements in the town itself and the number of plots available in the developing streets, which became focused more closely on market commerce and shops and began to overshadow the fewer available tenements in the castle.

Although later deeds also refer to land in the castle, as we might expect as the land did not disappear and was still available for transfer, they tend to describe an increase in tenements within the main township. This highlights Bridgnorth's development as a castle town, as suggested by Lilley, in that urban growth developed from the castle and filtered outwards to create the town.<sup>45</sup> This also emphasises the lineage and history of those owning land in the castle in the early deeds, as no tenements were available and the rise of the middling sort, like the town, was in its infancy. This area of land was therefore dominated by gentry families, which further illustrates the gentry's involvement in the property market concerning land away from their estates. In this way, they could be seen to use the tenements for revenue just as the middling sort did as the fourteenth century progressed. This is revealed in the deeds, since the town became a base for business and economic dealings as the gentry's relationship with the middling sort grew amid the town's development.<sup>46</sup>

The town's urban development quickly progressed to resemble a market town we see today, with the alignment of market streets developing around the town's "host institutions" of castle and churches, as suggested by Lilley. These "hosts" became the centre of Bridgnorth, with the castle gates aligned with the main street of

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<sup>44</sup> LLGC/NLW, Pitchford Hall (Ottley) Papers, deeds 498 and 444, grants in the castle grounds.

<sup>45</sup> Lilley, *Urban Life*, p. 142.

<sup>46</sup> The relationship between the gentry and the middling sort is discussed in Chapter 2.

the town. The military history of the town connected with its spiritual needs through the alignment of churches to the castle, with a church at one or both ends of the street.<sup>47</sup> The host institutions were also the heart of the commercial landscape, reinforcing the town's political and economic status.<sup>48</sup> The establishment of market streets was in effect an attempt to mirror the intentions of an original lord who sought to impose political and economic authority on the growing town.

Alongside this commercial growth, the development of suburbs can also be seen in Bridgnorth. Plots and tenements led from rows near the castle and spread through the town over the decades of the thirteenth century, creating streets of particular commerce, such as Mill Street, *mulnestret*, adjacent to the main market, and High Street.<sup>49</sup> Planned arrangements in the development of Bridgnorth can be noted by the elements retained over time to the building fronts and side property boundaries, which suggests that tenements were two and a half perches (c. forty feet) in width and were laid out along the market street.<sup>50</sup> Croom's topographical evidence revealed thirteen such plots which have survived on modern plans of High Street, beginning from the line of Listley Street and Cartway up to a mid-section of St Mary's Street and Whitburn Street. A continual line marked by back boundaries moving to the west of High Street indicates the plot lengths to be ten perches (c. hundred and sixty feet).<sup>51</sup>

Topographical evidence suggests that each street was initially two and a half perches (c. forty feet) wide and fifteen perches (c. two hundred fifty feet) apart and joined at their west ends.<sup>52</sup> In present day Bridgnorth, Listley Street and St Mary's Street are parallel but Whitburn Street diverges, indicating that it could have been a later addition to the town.<sup>53</sup> Traces of newer burgage plots have been found for all

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<sup>47</sup> See Map 1 below.

<sup>48</sup> Lilley, *Urban Life*, p. 145.

<sup>49</sup> Lilley, *Urban Life*, p. 142.

<sup>50</sup> Croom, 'Pre-Medieval Human Landscape', pp. 268-9, 331-2.

<sup>51</sup> Croom, 'Topographical Analysis', p. 37.

<sup>52</sup> See Map 1 below.

<sup>53</sup> Croom noted that Whitburn Street may have been parallel to Listley Street and St Mary's Street but was slowly diverged possibly to an earlier road. If this was the case, it could be attributed to this part of the borough being less built up or following a fire. Alternatively, it could have been due to a previous through road leading to the rural area surrounding St Leonard's church which was already firmly established at the time the borough was expanding.

three streets and appear to be smaller than the original, measuring one and a half perches (c. twenty-five feet) wide by seven and a half perches (c. hundred and twenty feet) long; this suggests that street sizes decreased in order to provide for the rising demand of property in the town.<sup>54</sup> As this demand for property increased, so too did the complexity of the structures themselves; densely built up areas or streets appeared, allowing for multi-dwelling tenements such as those we see Edmund and his social group utilise for their property endeavours.<sup>55</sup> Keen competition for access to the market can be observed in this sub-division of tenements, which resulted in the regular break up of *burghal* patterns and the development of smaller plots. The area in Bridgnorth where property was at a premium was High Street to the eastern ends of Listley Street, St Mary's Street and Whitburn Street according to topographical evidence, not surprising in a market town.<sup>56</sup> Evidence for this can be seen in a deed dated 1374, which saw a single tenement divided to provide two shops on High Street.<sup>57</sup>

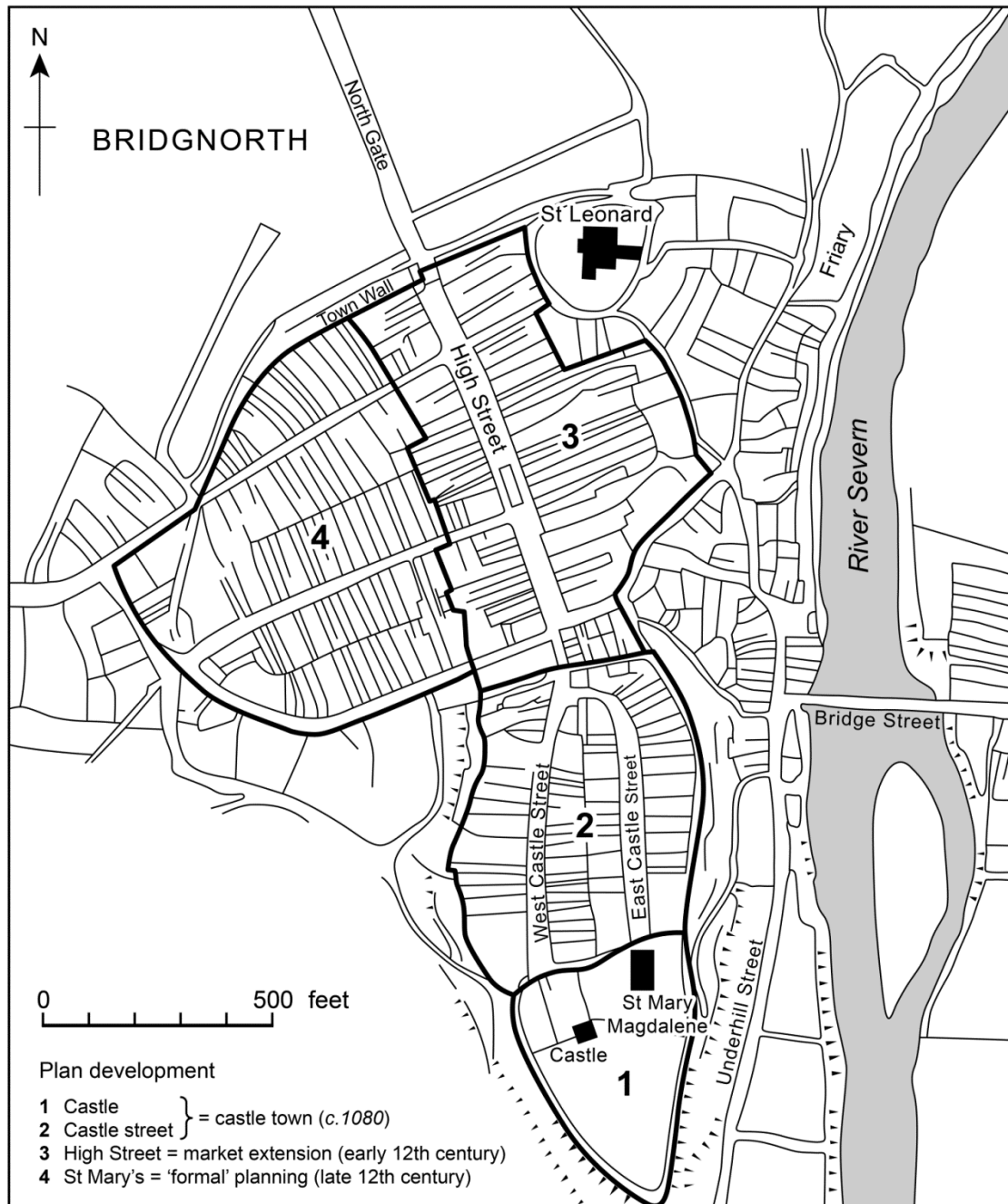
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<sup>54</sup> Croom, 'Pre-Medieval Human Landscape', pp. 335-43; SA, Mrs Dyas' collection, deed 4001/P/1/39.

<sup>55</sup> J. Schofield, P. Allen, and C. Taylor, 'Medieval Buildings and Property Development in the Area of Cheapside', *Transitions of the London and Middlesex Archaeological Society*, 41 (1990), pp. 186-9.

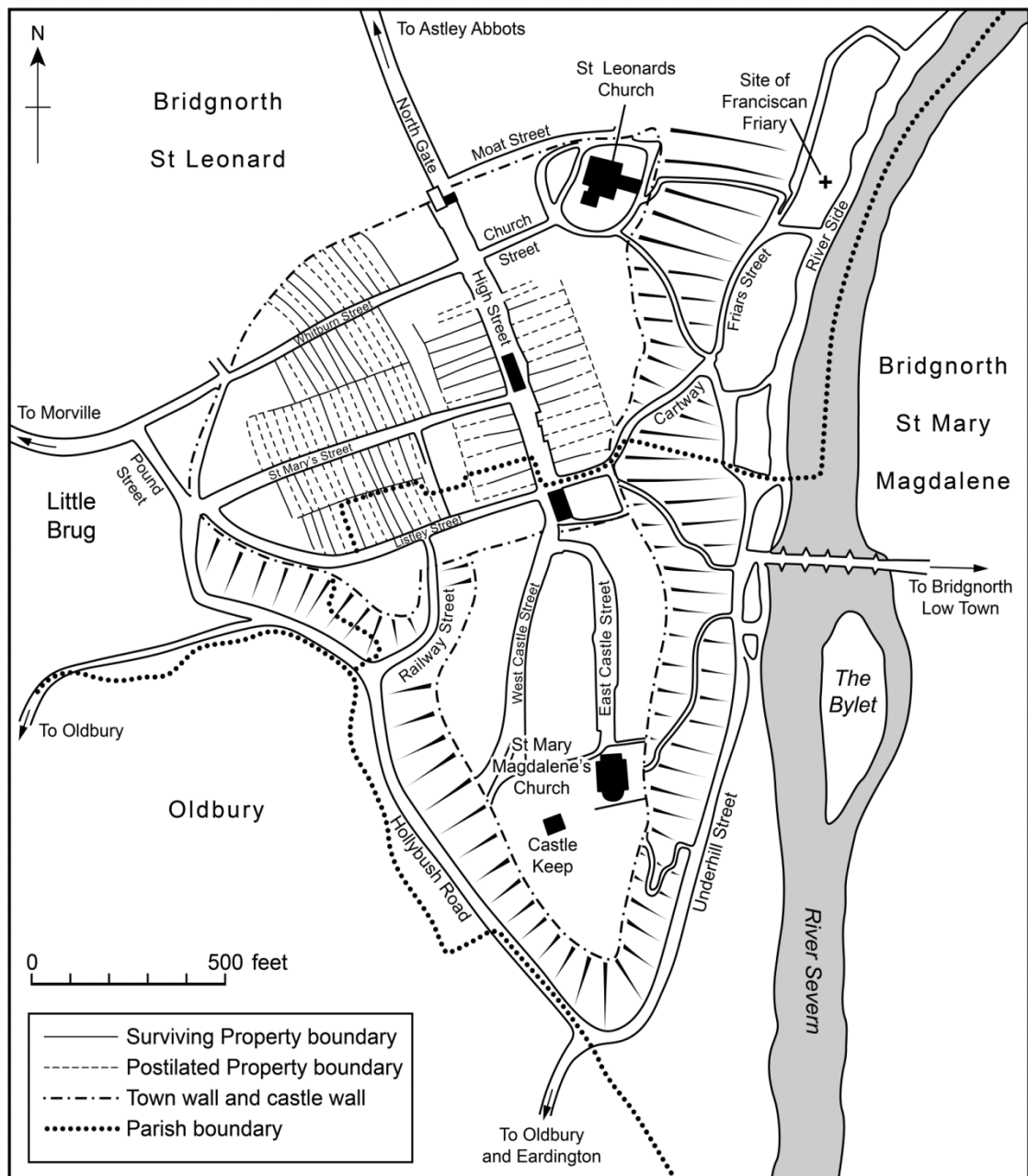
<sup>56</sup> Croom, 'Topographic Analysis', p. 31.

<sup>57</sup> LLGC/NLW, Pitchford Hall (Ottley) Papers, deeds 54 and 386.



Map 1 Elements of Bridgnorth's town planning<sup>58</sup>

<sup>58</sup> Lilley, *Urban Life*. p. 142. My great thanks to Keith Lilley for allowing me to use this map and for giving me an original draft.



**Map 2 Bridgnorth's plot development<sup>59</sup>**

Map 1 above illustrates the development of the town where the streets furthest away from the castle show the later development of Bridgnorth in the more regimented plots. In terms of Bridgnorth's urbanisation sweeping away from the castle, it is noticeable that the original suburbs nearer the castle show wider plots, as noted above, due to the lower population and less need for space during the

<sup>59</sup> Croom, 'Topographic Analysis', p. 37. My great thanks to Jane Croom for giving me permission to use this map.

thirteenth century. This is in contrast with the smaller plots which were developed in the fourteenth century in order to accommodate the growing population and the changing outlook of the townspeople of a market town.<sup>60</sup>

Maps 1 and 2 demonstrate the building phase which occurred in the late twelfth century and is described by Lilley as the 'formal' planning stage. This is reflected in the deeds from 1300, as only then they begin to name specific streets in which a piece of land or tenement was located. The number of deeds rises as the decades of the boom period began, as discussed in the introduction. The streets in this quickly developing area include Whitburn *Whytebourne* Street, High Street and *Leystrey* (Listley) Street. As Map 2 demonstrates, the decreasing plot sizes, due to the need for space from the late thirteenth century onwards, show postulated property boundaries alongside the surviving property boundary lines. Croom also noticed this with topographical evidence showing where property was at a premium and High street, Whitburn and Listley Street all showed the division of burgages and even the individual buildings on them as a result of the competition for access to the market with the frequent sub-division of tenements.<sup>61</sup> There were most likely many more transfers of property in these areas which cannot be traced. The data for Figure 9 below is taken from the deeds where the location of a tenement is specifically stated as located in that street or area, but many of the deeds are vague in describing a 'piece of land' or simply a tenement next to one held by such and such.

### **Street names**

It was not just the town development and expansion of tenements which saw a rise in transfers, but also the outlying fields surrounding the town. Figure 9 below shows the number of fields transferred over the decades.

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<sup>60</sup> Croom, 'Pre-Medieval Human Landscape', pp. 268-9, 331-2.

<sup>61</sup> Croom, 'Topographical Analysis', p. 30.

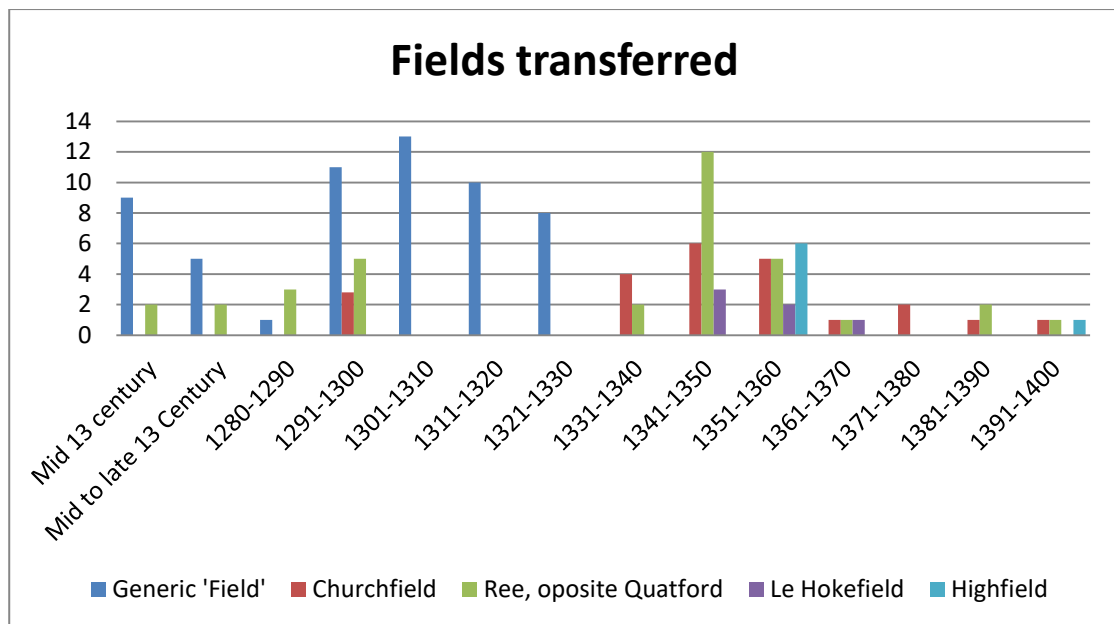


Figure 9 Grants of land in fields surrounding Bridgnorth<sup>62</sup>

Many of the deeds state a measurement of land in a specific field and three fields in particular appeared popular Churchfield, Hokefield and le Ree, opposite Quatford. Grants of land in these areas appeared during the same time frame as the appearance of street names. As Figure 9 above shows, up until 1330, the name of a field is not stated in the deeds and instead a measurement of land in a field is given, often simply described as a piece of land. It is also noticeable that, as with street names, the names of fields are not stated until the boom period of the middle decades. This could be a reflection of the rise in more formal deeds and documentation of transactions, as well as the expansion of Bridgnorth by the middling sort.

<sup>62</sup> LLGC/NLW, Pitchford Hall (Ottley) Papers; SA, Mrs Dyas' collection.



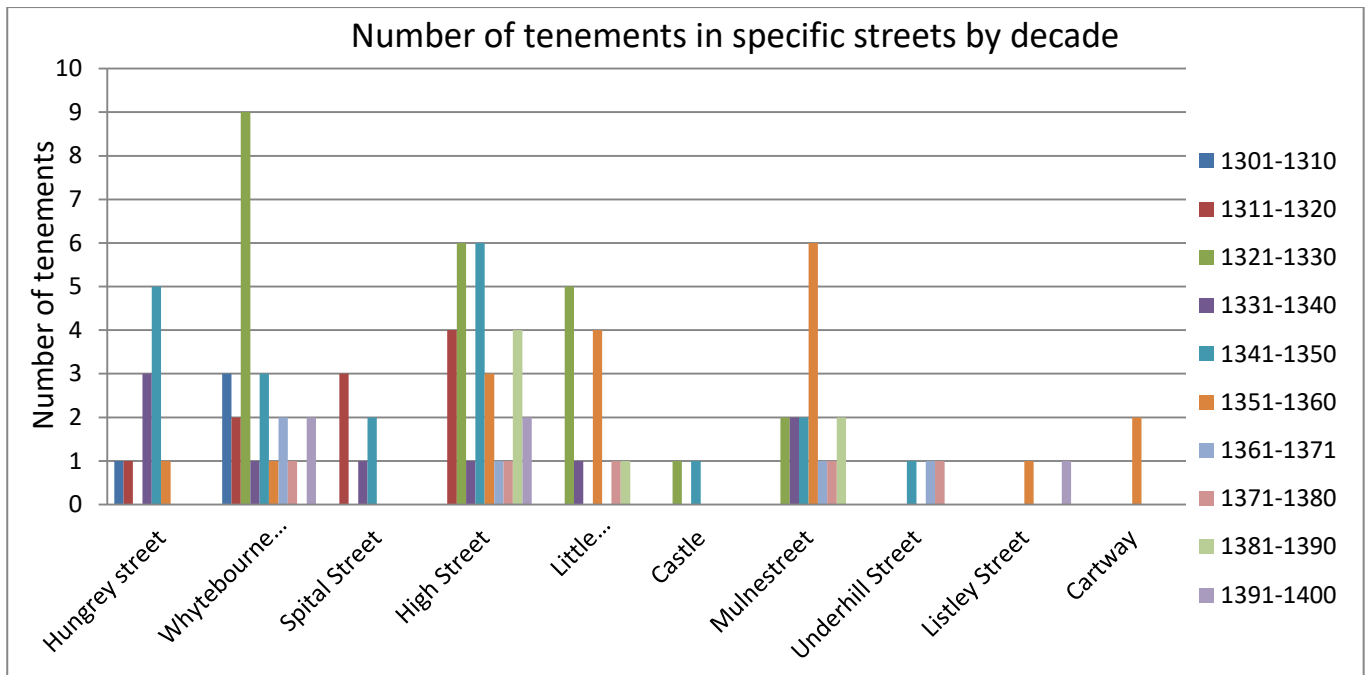


Figure 10 Tenements in specific streets throughout the fourteenth century<sup>63</sup>

Figure 10 reveals that it was not just the new area of development (area 4 on Map 1, 'St Mary's "formal planning"'), in the late thirteenth century which saw Bridgnorth's expansion, as there was also a rise in tenements and plots in areas known as Underhill and Cartway. Underhill Street is located behind the castle and runs alongside the River Severn, an area outside the planning and building phases noted by Lilley and Croom. The development of Cartway, which accessed the bridge over the River Severn, suggests that, following the formal planning of the late twelfth century, townspeople were quick to develop the town further outside the town walls through the fourteenth century, as suggested by Croom and these areas became Bridgnorth's suburbs.

This is also evident in *MulneStreet*, or Mill Street as it is presently known, which again is located outside the town walls and the recorded planning phases before the late thirteenth century, as noted by Croom and Lilley. Mill Street is located across the River Severn and is accessed by Bridge Street and appears to have been a popular area from the 1320s onwards. In the 1350s, the deeds show John Canne acquire a number of tenements and land in that street. Today, we see Cann Hall road leading off Mill Street, which supports the view that Bridgnorth's middling sort bought

<sup>63</sup> LLGC/NLW, Pitchford Hall (Ottley) Papers; SA, Mrs Dyas' collection.

up urban estates and left their mark.<sup>64</sup> Despite the rise in the number of tenements, it is also noteworthy that alongside these tenements, pieces of land in certain streets were still transferred or referred to in deeds. This also illustrates the development of Bridgnorth into a market town as a “work in progress” throughout the fourteenth century. Bridgnorth’s development was possible because of the economic growth and success of those building it and was a factor in the middling sort’s property transfers.

The medieval urban property market was typically bought piece by piece, as and when possible. W. G. Hoskins states that it would be wrong to assume large accumulations of real property were either permanent or even typical.<sup>65</sup> With scattered locations and varying types of property, shops and assorted tenements, the buyer’s interest was simply in acquiring property and land whenever the opportunity presented itself. Short-term loans could be called upon quickly and offer speed of investment and presented an immediate source of financial gain for rentier participants who could see a healthy return on renting multi-unit properties. As Derek Keene noted, this was a ‘convenient way of employing capital not immediately required for trade’ and allowed for the quick disposal of personal funds during difficult periods.<sup>66</sup>

### **Value of land and type of land**

The value of land and property and the return an investor might expect in relation to the sum paid and the annual property value are key aspects for understanding the economic climate of Bridgnorth and any changes to it. Bean noted that a purchase price of land or property represented ten years’ annual value in the thirteenth century, but varied through the fourteenth century. By the mid-fifteenth century, it had risen to twenty years.<sup>67</sup> This suggests that the sum given was based on the perceived value of the property as felt by the grantor and grantee in reflection of local conditions. The modal figure of rent in Bridgnorth for 1325-1330 was 3s., which was

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<sup>64</sup> Urban Estates are discussed further below in the case study of John Canne.

<sup>65</sup> Hoskins, *Local History in England*; R. Hilton, *Class, Conflict and Crisis of Feudalism: Essays in Medieval Social History* (London: Hambledon Press: 1985), p. 171.

<sup>66</sup> Derek Keene, ‘The Property Market in English Towns 1100-1600’, in, J. C. Marie-Vigueur, *D’Une Ville a L’autre: Structures, Matérielles et Organisation de l’Espace dans les Villes Europeenes, xiiie-xvie Siecles* (Rome, Collection de l’Ecole française de Rome, 1986), p. 204.

<sup>67</sup> J. M. Bean, ‘Landlords’, in E. Miller (ed.), *Agrarian History of England and Wales, III: 1348-1500* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), pp. 526-86.

the value paid and what landowners expected to receive. Margaret Yates noted in her study of the feet fines of Berkshire, and echoed in the findings of Bridgnorth, that there was a large turnover of property in the years following 1327; she also identified an increase in property transactions in the following two decades, but in her study, which continued after the fourteenth century, Yates noted little change in the social composition of the landowners.<sup>68</sup>

Evidence relating to Bridgnorth illustrates its developing land market throughout the fourteenth century where land appeared for sale and was then quickly bought or rented out in response to demand. Yates suggested the cause for this, most notably for Berkshire from 1300-1500, as partly due to lay professionals wishing to make an entrée into landed society, actions also observed for Bridgnorth's middling sort.<sup>69</sup> Notable is the increase of deeds in Bridgnorth for the same period as Yates witnessed in Berkshire, 1300-1350, as seen in Figure 7 above. The fall in the number of deeds in the following decades is attributed to the consequences of the plague. The sporadic outbreaks of plague following its first and international outbreak in 1348-9 mark periods where there appeared to be a shortage of free land, which has been noted in studies by Bean, Carpenter and McFarlane.<sup>70</sup> They observed patterns in freehold lands, observing those under lordship which were not coming onto the market, unlike customary and demesne lands. Concerns over inheritance in freehold land could be seen as a factor for this and observed through the underlying clauses that pepper the deeds. These clauses stated for example that land should remain in the family through the heirs and if no heir was born or survived, the land should return to the grantor on the death of the grantee in what is known as fee tailing and discussed further below.<sup>71</sup> This apparent fall in the number of deeds at Bridgnorth in the latter part of the fourteenth century relates only to the total number of deeds, but this is not to say the land market came to a halt or that interest in property fell. As we

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<sup>68</sup> Yates, 'Market and freehold', p. 594.

<sup>69</sup> Yates, 'Market and Freehold', p. 582.

<sup>70</sup> Rosemary Horrox, *Black Death*; Bean 'Landlords', pp. 526-86; Carpenter, *Locality and Polity*; K. B. McFarlane, *The Nobility of Later Medieval England: The Ford Lectures and Related Studies* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1973), p. 65.

<sup>71</sup> Fee tailing developed in the thirteenth century by the interest created by grants, other than in frankmarriage and was intended to descend lineally so long as there were descendants of the donees.

will see, the growth of simple and complex land holdings shows a steady line of transactions emerging.

### **Rise and fall in land economy**

Transactions for any one property can be seen through the evolving urbanisation of Bridgnorth, where tenements allowed rentiers to gain a profit through the commercial development of the town. This had previously been denied to them, as available property had mainly been in the form of landed estates outside the town walls. These estates were the preserve of the gentry and were transferred through inheritance, *post-mortem*, rather than an *inter-vivos* market in land. A growing confidence in the land market is illustrated by the increase of land transferred by deed in the mid-fourteenth century, as shown in Figure 7 above which also shows the relative numbers of grants, leases and releases. This land was granted for a specified time and not perpetually, which may point to concerns over the immediate future of the local land market as, unlike a perpetual grant, a grant for a specified number of years allowed for a quicker return on rent and thus for practical investment during an uncertain period. This coincides with the outbreak of the plague, which may have been the driving force for this change, where a short-term outlook became the norm. Despite such economic uncertainties, it is clear that the first half of the fourteenth century witnessed an increase of growth.

The arrival of the plague in England in 1348, most likely in late spring or the early summer of 1349 in Bridgnorth, caused a dramatic fall in the number of grants and land transactions taking place and also in their value.<sup>72</sup> The Inquisition Post Mortem of William Pitchford, brother of Edmund Pitchford, highlights the fall of prices in Bridgnorth indirectly, as it outlined a messuage and a virgate of land that was worth 40d. annually at the time of the inquisition. Although this is a substantial amount, it

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<sup>72</sup> R. A. Davies, 'The Effect of the Black Death on the Parish Priests in the Medieval Diocese of Coventry and Lichfield', *Historical Research*, IXII (1989), pp. 85-90; J. L. Bolton, "'The World Turned Upside Down': Plague as an Agent of Economic and Social Change", in M. Ormrod and P. Linley (eds.), *The Black Death in England* (Stamford: Paul Watkins, 1996), pp. 17-78.

does appear to have fallen in value due to the ‘present pestilence’, as stated in the inquisition.<sup>73</sup>

As already noted, the effect of the plague, to a greater or lesser degree, must be considered as a factor when explaining the fall in the number of deeds, if only for the practical reason that the plague reduced the population. It is perhaps also for the same reason that the stipulation of the length of grants and leases changed over the period, as perpetual grants and those given for a number of lives or an extended period of time diminished as the fourteenth century progressed. This can be seen in Figure 11 below. While it is possible this reflects a lack of evidence in the surviving deeds, the disappearance of the term of years after 1360 does go some way to indicate the changing approach to the terms and organisation of leasing arrangements.

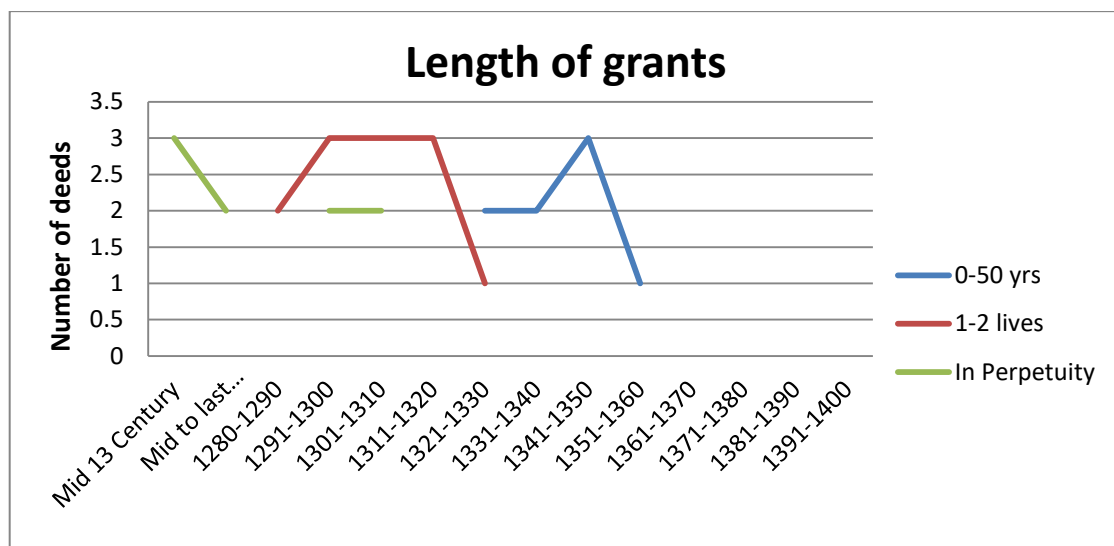


Figure 11 Length of grants<sup>74</sup>

What is noticeable is that despite stipulation for the length of transfers, seen continuously in the deeds from the end of the thirteenth century up to 1360, the length of grants appear in three phases. The deeds show that in the early decades of the study, there were more perpetual grants; by the middle decades of the fourteenth

<sup>73</sup> CCR, IX, p. 279. CIPM, dated 1349, mentions the effect of pestilence. In the same year William's brother, Nicholas, traded in lesser quantities of wool than his father and the transactions we see earlier in the decade in 1343. CPR, III, p. 69 states the executors of the will of Johanna Pitchford, mother of Edmund and William Pitchford, died of plague. CCR, II, the land William Pitchford held at the time of his death was lowered in value due to the 'pestilence'.

<sup>74</sup> LLGC/NLW, Pitchford Hall (Ottley) Papers; SA, Mrs Dyas' Collection.

century, they had reduced the term to one to two lives; and from 1330-1360, deeds tended to stipulate only a length of time of up to fifty years. These changes can be attributed to two factors: First, the type of property transferred shifted from land in and around Bridgnorth to town-based tenements. This suggests that the later transfers were concerned with a landlord's business and income, where a landlord could grant and release property. This contrasted with earlier transfers, which would most likely be the product of inheritance of family lands. Second, the effects of the plague would have left many landlords with property they wished to rent out quickly; transactions from this period onwards demonstrate that landlords felt it would not be economically viable to restrict a grant to a specified period of time.

Bridgnorth was not the only town to see its property market react to the changing times of the fourteenth century, as an increase in leases over perpetual grants during this period has also been noted in Coventry and Norwich.<sup>75</sup> Studies of Coventry, London and Winchester all reveal that the demand for property coincided with the fall in perpetual grants; however, like these towns and cities, Bridgnorth shows that grants were the principal form of land transfer.<sup>76</sup> The fall in perpetual grants with the rise in leases meant that landlords tended to hold on to property and even if the property changed in value, the brief term of a lease ensured that changes in the property market could be more easily observed and capitalised upon. The increase in the number of leases indicates the local economic conditions of a town, which in turn reveal the actions and priorities of the individual participants involved in its economy.

When combined, this evidence allows us to identify four main factors that defined the rental economy of Bridgnorth: first, the grants indicate who was granting land to whom; second, the location of the property; third, the length of the tenancy; and, fourth, the annual rent to be paid for the tenement. Combined, these factors demonstrate that the rental economy of Bridgnorth help us to identify the middling sort and their dealings. The first factor, which indicates who granted land to whom, has been previously discussed, when addressing how I have defined the middling sort

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<sup>75</sup> Goddard, *Lordship and Medieval Urbanisation*; E. Rutledge, 'Lordship and Tenants: Housing and the Rented Property Market in Early Fourteenth Norwich', *Urban History*, 3 (1995), pp. 12-24.

<sup>76</sup> Goddard, *Lordship and Medieval Urbanisation*; Keene, 'The Property Market', p. 213.

of this study. These business relationships emerged and are emphasised when the land or the tenements in question were close to land held by individuals whose names appeared in witness lists of the transfers. This further demonstrates the closeness of the leading members of the middling sort, as identified in Chapter 1 and 2.

Second, the location of the property can go some way in demonstrating the time frame of Bridgnorth's development. The newly emerging street names and areas under development were located outside the town walls, where later deeds name streets which did not exist at the early points of this study. This suggests that the middling sort prospered and drove these new developments with the hope of seeing a return on their speculations.

Third, the length of a tenancy demonstrates that the middling sort, as also noted in previous chapters, was economically minded and saw these properties purely as income. In order to benefit from this income, a tenancy for life or an extended number of years would not have been viable or wise. Therefore, the pace at which Bridgnorth was developed in the fourteenth century matched the shorter tenancies that landlords now offered.

Finally, the fourth factor concerns the amount of rent paid, which directly reflects the rental economy of that period. This also impacted on the property endeavours of the middling sort as they appear on tenurial ladders, which are discussed further below. It further demonstrates the popularity of fee farming in the early decades of study, where a landlord would rent out the area to be farmed and receive a rent for it. This activity was translated from arable pursuits, which dominated the early decades, to the development of the town in the mid-fourteenth century. This physical movement of focus also reveals that the rental economy of Bridgnorth became more town focused as the middling sort drove the development of streets and tenements, onto which they applied the same methods of renting for a fee.

The importance of these factors relates not only to the deal agreed but also the term of the lease. From this, we gain a sense of what a landlord believed to be the price he or she might expect over the coming year, with a mind to the local economy

and any future monies and also the parties who had the funds to meet these terms.<sup>77</sup> With the small sample available here it is difficult to discern the frequency of turnover of any one property, although, similar studies have estimated that turnover of a property was, on average, once every five and half years to every seven years.<sup>78</sup> The turnover of Bridgnorth's property, as seen in Figure 7 above; the tenurial ladders; and John Canne's property in Mill Street, both discussed below, all illustrate the quick turnover of Bridgnorth property market.

### **Types of land: Simple and complex**

The physical changes to Bridgnorth, as seen through its urbanisation, can be best illustrated by the type of landholdings available, whether they were simple or complex, both of which varied throughout the period. A simple unit of landholding can be described as a single messuage and it rarely included any accompanying land. Other types of simple landholding included those containing a moiety or division of a single block of land, which could infrequently be explained by the division of heirs. Complex landholdings, by contrast, contained a number of different types of property, such as tenements, messuages and a piece of land such as a plot in a field, whose constituent parts could be located across the town. The changes in simple and complex landholdings in this study show the continuity of the property market through the fourteenth century despite the fall in the number of deeds detailing grants, leases and releases. The nature of landholding, whether simple or complex, shows the changing requirements for the land and property by the townspeople as they now sought more complex holdings. This was mainly due to the increase in available tenements and areas within the town and not simply the availability of land in Bridgnorth's environs which, as we have already discussed, dominated land transferred in deeds from the earlier period.

In terms of the changing nature of land transferred, Bridgnorth reflects Yates's findings with a decline in simple land holdings from 1310-1319, during which the number of tenements identifiable as complex holdings increased. However, despite the growth of complex holdings, the transfer of simple landholdings did not altogether

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<sup>77</sup> Goddard, *Lordship and Medieval Urbanisation*, p. 236.

<sup>78</sup> Goddard, *Lordship and Medieval Urbanisation*; Keene, 'Property Market' p. 213.



disappear but continued, albeit to a lesser degree, suggesting the land market grew at the cost of the simple holdings but not the abolition of it as seen below in Figure 12. Yates's study of Berkshire's feet of fines showed a rise in the transfer of simple landholdings in the decade 1310-1319, making up 62% of the fines, but a decline in the transfer of simple holdings to just one message in the fifteenth century.<sup>79</sup> More complex landholdings rose in number through the fourteenth century, reflecting social changes and the ambitions of local landlords, which presumably constructed these more complex units through accumulation, as noted by W.G. Hoskins and also discussed below.<sup>80</sup>

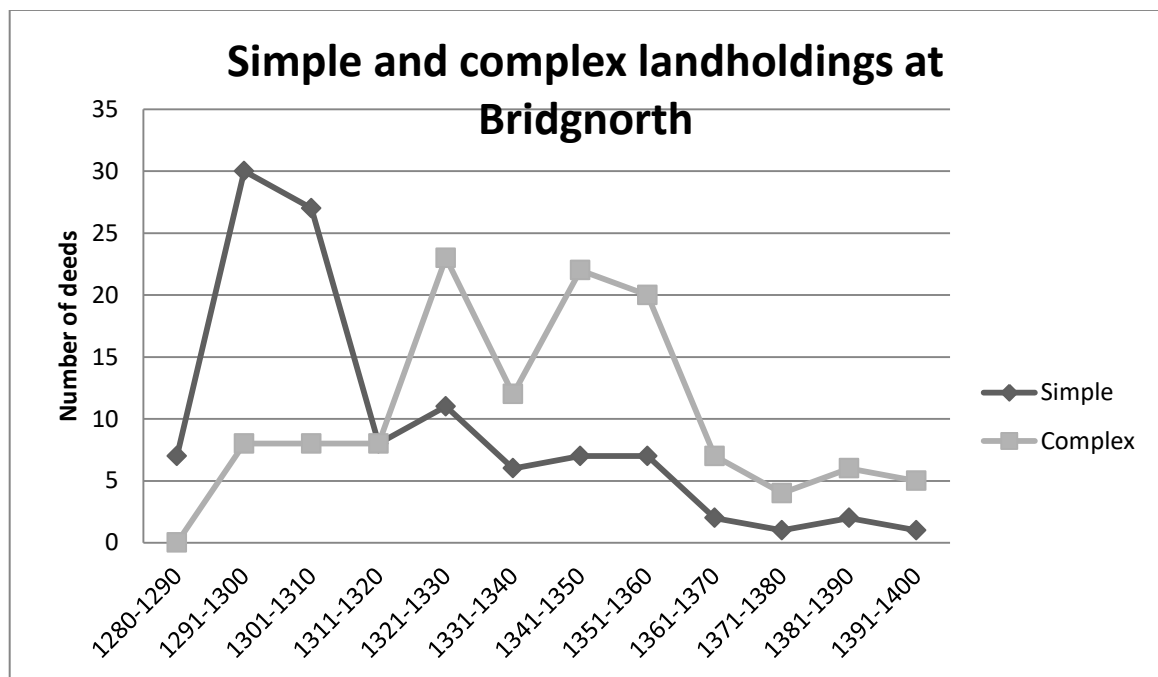


Figure 12 Simple and complex holdings<sup>81</sup>

## Land and growing wealth

The urban land market is a crucial indicator of the economic conditions of a town, as noted by Richard Goddard in his study of the city of Coventry.<sup>82</sup> Firstly, the economic means of those in the land market can be attributed to the development of the town. This is evident in larger towns and cities where the commercial endeavours of the burgesses coincided with the transformation of urban plots into tenements,

<sup>79</sup> Yates, 'Market and Freehold', p. 586.

<sup>80</sup> Hoskins, *Local History*.

<sup>81</sup> LLGC/NLW, Pitchford Hall (Ottley) Papers.

<sup>82</sup> Goddard, *Lordship and Medieval Urbanisation*, p. 191.

sometimes resulting in many buildings cramped and huddled together, a feature noted above in regards to Bridgnorth, where the size of plots decreased in the middle decades of the fourteenth century.<sup>83</sup> Secondly, there was a need for premises for workshops as well as homes. These were in addition to those used for income and rent.

The development of Bridgnorth and its commerce made optimal use of the land available and also allowed for more tenants and rents. This last development came mostly through the frequent letting and sub-letting by landlords such as Edmund Pitchford and John Canne, discussed below. The importance of commerce to Bridgnorth is reflected in this form of housing where people could now live, work and trade close to the centre of town with shop-fronted properties facing the street.

Evidence of this from York in the early fourteenth century shows purpose-built blocks for commercial property, where a small living space was supplied above the shop but the main intention was to accommodate retail activities.<sup>84</sup> A similar pattern was seen in Coventry's market place in 1410, where newly built tenements and shops appeared. In London, contracts dating 1369-73 refer to the construction of shops or long rows with a living space above that were said to be 'erected by one in the ownership of a single landlord'.<sup>85</sup> As previously discussed, Bridgnorth's trade was demonstrated with the development of a focal market point in High Street, an area of the town associated with Henry III.<sup>86</sup> And as did other towns, Bridgnorth also held an annual fair, which was granted to the town in 1359, to fall three days after the feast of St Leonard.<sup>87</sup>

These changes are also reflected in Bridgnorth's developing urban identity, which saw the town transform into a noticeably urban landscape, recognisable through the creation and increasing importance of the market place away from the town's previous focal point of the castle. A feature of this urban landscape was the emphasis on the style of buildings for their commercial capacity. This demonstrates

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<sup>83</sup> Goddard, *Lordship and Medieval Urbanisation*, p. 191.

<sup>84</sup> J. R. J. Morris, *Class, Sect and Party: The Making of the British Middle Class, Leeds, 1820-50* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1990), p. 190.

<sup>85</sup> Keene, 'Property Market', pp. 232-3.

<sup>86</sup> Lilley, *Urban Life*, p. 146.

<sup>87</sup> SA, Mrs Dyas' Collection, deed 4597/2, a grant for an annual fair.

the growing economic interests of those owning and letting properties.<sup>88</sup> The various types of property available to the towns' middling sort allowed them to live and work there, with many town-based merchants selling from their homes. Within the context of Bridgnorth's locality and other like sized towns, these types of properties can be seen as key venues for displaying the power of the middling sort. R. J. Morris has commented that they were 'the locations and structures within which the middling groups sought, extended, expressed and defended their power'.<sup>89</sup> More than just the accumulation of property, they held meaning and significance, as within localities material forms of farms, messuages, tenements and crofts etc. could all be seen and admired. In this context, the property the middling sort held was as a visual source of status and power.

The extent, value or number of an individual's properties, as we will see in the case study of John Canne below, reflected a person's social standing. However, in this same period, issues of status can be detected in the portfolios of urban properties gathered by the relatively wealthy middling sort. The urban property owners' social status could be dictated by the amount and location of property they owned, which reinforced their place in the urban hierarchy. For some, such as John Canne, the acquisition of land appeared to have been methodical and concentrated in one particular area, forming a block or "urban estate". Derek Keene has argued that artisans and merchants often held numerous properties together and sublet to relatives or those in the same line of work.<sup>90</sup> This theory is supported by Kate Kelsey Staples in her study of the Husting wills, which show that tenements operated as rental properties and capital for an individual.<sup>91</sup>

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<sup>88</sup> Lilley has noted that this form of town growth, where the market place took the central focus, can also be seen in other castle towns across Europe established between 1110-1300, such as Kenzingen and Brandenburg in Germany. Lilley, *Urban Life*, p. 146; Keith Lilley 'Urban Planning after the Black Death: Townscape Transformation in Later Medieval England 1350-1530', *Urban History*, 42, issue 1 (Feb, 2015), pp. 22-42.

<sup>89</sup> Morris, *Class, Sect and Party*, p. 14.

<sup>90</sup> Keene, *Survey of Medieval Winchester*, p. 219.

<sup>91</sup> Staples, *Daughters of London*, p. 74.

## Tenements and landlords

The Bridgnorth deeds reveal a shift of focus from the land of Bridgnorth's environs to tenements and properties within the town, which were transferred mainly by the rising middling sort, as identified in the introduction. As the fourteenth century progressed, the property transfers of the lower gentry appear to decrease, as demonstrated by a decade by decade breakdown illustrated in Figure 13.

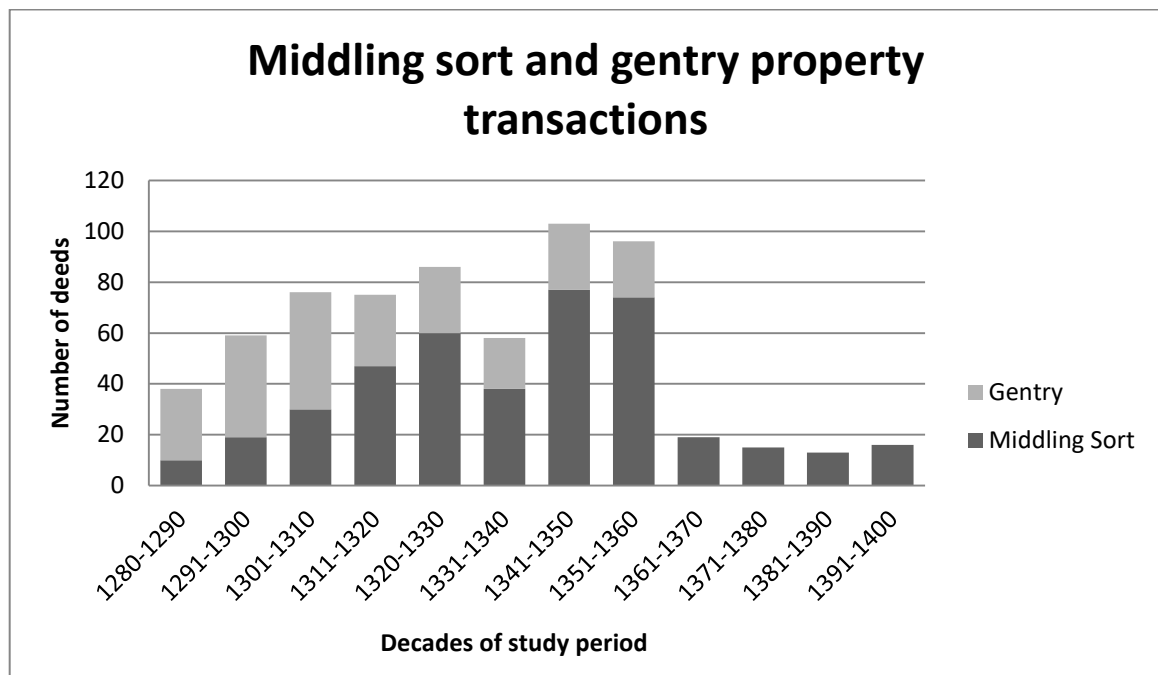


Figure 13 Property transactions of the middling sort and gentry<sup>92</sup>

This indicates a move away from a property market monopolised by the gentry and a rise of the middling sort's presence as landowners, closely connected to the town through financial, civic or trade interests.<sup>93</sup> What enabled the middling sort to do this was the style of tenement housing, which could incorporate properties with lofts and gardens. The grant from John Rondulph to Alice, his daughter, and Edmund Pitchford, for example, included a barn with gardens and curtilage in Bridgnorth.<sup>94</sup> The introduction of tenements meant that property transfers could be easily and quickly managed and that the middling sort could acquire a number of tenements, as a whole

<sup>92</sup> LLGC/NLW, Pitchford Hall (Ottley) Papers.

<sup>93</sup> LLGC/NLW, Pitchford Hall (Ottley) Papers, deed 1292, dated 1293. Margery, widow of Hugh de Baskerville releases to her son, Baldwyn, land in and outside of the vill of Norwode, which Hugh had enfeoffed to Baldwyn. Witnesses included Knights Alan de Glasseneye and Randulf de Arraz.

<sup>94</sup> LLGC/NLW, Pitchford Hall (Ottley) Papers, deed 26, dated 1341. John Rondulph's grant to Alice, his daughter, and Edmund Pitchford.

building or in part, in a piecemeal fashion, which could lead to an extensive property portfolio that they could use as a sitting investment or as a swift economic asset.

The manner in which the middling sort used tenement style housing for economic gains is another factor as to why they became prosperous, as they saw opportunity in their expanding environment and utilised it alongside their trade interests. The introduction of tenements led many of the middling sort to become landlords. It is unlikely that they themselves lived in these properties and instead they used them as a means of accumulating wealth, as evidenced by the speed with which a property might be transferred.

The speed by which properties changed hands is also an example of how regularly a property held by an individual was divided to accommodate a number of people as “subtenants”. This property could be one of many held by the landlord on a larger urban estate or one of several properties across the town. This structure of tenure has been identified by some historians as a ‘tenorial ladder’, discussed below, as a means of identifying the landlords and subtenants.<sup>95</sup> This ladder can also be used to explore a person’s social status in the town. Their position on the tenorial ladder was subject to the interrelationships between the property holder and their tenants and subtenants. The property owner held a higher social status with more urban property than those who rented from them and held less property and social status.<sup>96</sup>

As informative as this structure may be, it must be kept within the context of specific circumstances, and, in this case, defined by Bridgnorth’s development. The activities of John Canne offer an example of a landlord acquiring an urban estate, while the structure of a tenorial ladder can be illustrated through the examination of the actions of Edmund Pitchford, as outlined below. As we will see, such tenorial ladders should not be wholly relied upon when constructing the social strata of a town; the lack of property deeds with sufficient detail inevitably hinders full accuracy and comprehensiveness. Edmund Pitchford’s ladder, for example, can only suggest his social position with regard to his property transactions and further evidence of his

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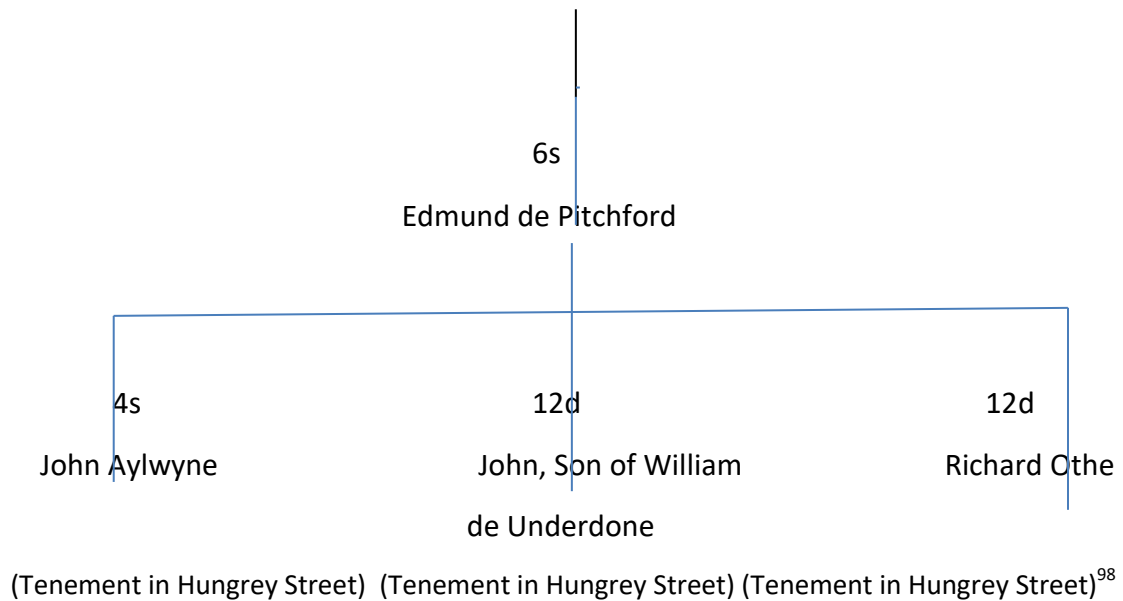
<sup>95</sup> Lilley, *Urban Life*, p. 201.



<sup>96</sup> Barron and Sutton, *Medieval London Widows*.

civic roles and family contacts are required to establish his social status, as noted in previous chapters.<sup>97</sup>

### Tenurial Ladder

Lord Richard de Mughale and Lord John de Longe (Chaplains' of Bridgnorth)



William de Underdon	John son of William de Underdon	John Pule	John Alwyne	John Barner		John Perkyn	Richard Othe Brugge	Henry Cheote
<div style="display: flex; justify-content: space-between; align-items: center;"> <div style="text-align: center;">  </div> <div>Highway</div> <div style="text-align: center;">  </div> </div>								

**Figure 14 Edmund Pitchford's tenurial ladder**<sup>99</sup>

The top of the tenurial ladder was occupied by those possessing the most wealth and usually the highest status. In the above example, from 1347, Richard de Mughale and John de Longe were at the top of Edmund Pitchford's tenurial ladder, as

<sup>97</sup> *Calendar of Letters Patent, Edward III*, Vol 8, 1348-1350, p. 175. Edmund Pitchford acting as a commission of oyer and terminer, showing his civic role in Bridgnorth. See Appendix for further tenurial ladders in Bridgnorth.

<sup>98</sup> LLGC/NLW, Pitchford Hall (Ottley) Papers, deed 375, dated 1347. The sums that Edmund's tenants gave him are a portion of the overall rent which allows for the middleman profit while still paying those they were letting from.

<sup>99</sup> LLGC/NLW, Pitchford Hall (Ottley) Papers.

far as we can tell from documents relating to three properties in Hungrey Street.<sup>100</sup> Richard and John received 6s. annually by subletting to Edmund, who in turn received rents from his subtenants, who could then sublet further down the tenurial ladder. Edmund sublet his properties as follows: one sublet to John Aylwyne, between the tenements of John Pule and John Barner; one to John, son of William de Underdone, between the tenements of John Pule and William de Underdone, and lastly one to Richard Othe, between the tenements of John Perkyn and Henry Cheote.<sup>101</sup> The amount Edmund paid to Richard de Mughale and John de Longe, compared to the rent Edmund could collect from his subtenants, suggests subtenants made the most profit with the highest returns.<sup>102</sup> This evidence relates to only three properties Edmund held of Richard de Mughale and John de Longe in Hungrey Street, but these are not the only properties he held in the area or the only ones that he sublet; thus, we have only a view of one of Edmund's tenurial ladders; undoubtedly there were more, which constantly changed and fluctuated as tenements came and went and the property market rose and fell.

Alongside the three properties Edmund held of Richard de Mughale and John de Longe, he also held property in Whitburn Street later that same year, 1347, where he leased a tenement to William de Westwode and his wife Isabel, between tenements held by his brother, John Pitchford and one by Matilda Page.<sup>103</sup> This deed suggests that Matilda Page and John Pitchford held the lease but were not the resident tenants of the tenements, indicating that they may also have sublet the property. In 1352, Edmund received a lease from John le Baxtare and his wife Margery, for three lives, of a tenement in Whitburn Street next to the tenement of John Pitchford and one formerly held by John le Baxtare.<sup>104</sup> These tenurial ladders were constantly changing and offer a window into this moment of Edmund's property portfolio, but also illustrate the swiftness of turnover in Bridgnorth's property market and the interest individuals and families took in one particular area.

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<sup>100</sup> LLGC/NLW, Pitchford Hall (Ottley) Papers, deed 375, dated 1347.

<sup>101</sup> LLGC/NLW, Pitchford Hall (Ottley) Papers, deed 375, dated 1347.

<sup>102</sup> Lilley, *Urban Life*, pp. 201-203.

<sup>103</sup> LLGC/NLW, Pitchford Hall (Ottley) Papers, deed 207, Edmund's lease to William de Westwode.

<sup>104</sup> LLGC/NLW, Pitchford Hall (Ottley) Papers, deed 393, John le Baxtare and his wife Margery give Edmund a lease of three lives.

Matilda Page's family appear to have held a property in Whitburn Street prior to the above lease. In 1345, Edmund paid an annual rent of 2s. to William de la Hulle for a messuage in Whitburn street formerly held by Roger Page, Matilda's husband, but here again Edmund appears to be subletting.<sup>105</sup> In 1344, Edmund also granted to Matilda Page a house and curtilage near a tenement held by his brother, Robert Pitchford, in Whitburn Street and reserved part of the tenement which lay near a tenement held by his mother Johanna Pitchford.<sup>106</sup> The property itself was not granted in full, only a part of it, highlighting how tenements could be divided and that a single property could consist of a number of individual units which could be let separately by several landlords in order to increase revenue. This is evident when Alice Cheote quitclaimed all her right to part of a tenement along with the curtilage to John Canne in 1351.<sup>107</sup> As noted by Maryanne Kowaleski, it is in relation to burgage tenure such as this, where a property could be freely divided, that opportunities existed for women to enter the property market if they were otherwise not entitled to a family estate. In these instances, they could inherit tenements and their rents, issues that will be discussed more fully in chapter 5.<sup>108</sup>

The nature of subletting is also demonstrated in the property records, which reveal the continual division of and additions to urban property. This translated to the option of subletting which revealed a sophisticated land market of profit gained through property.<sup>109</sup> As already noted, these brief glimpses of property deeds relating to Edmund Pitchford over a seven-year period focus on Whitburn Street and do not account for tenements and land he held in Bridgnorth, which he also granted and leased throughout this period until his death in 1354.<sup>110</sup>

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<sup>105</sup> LLGC/NLW, Pitchford Hall (Ottley) Papers, deed 20.

<sup>106</sup> LLGC/NLW, Pitchford Hall (Ottley) Papers, deed 24, dated 1344, Edmund's grant to Matilda.

<sup>107</sup> SA, Mrs Dyas' collection, deed 796/6 1340, Robert Cheote holds a tenement in Mill Street; deed 796/9 1351, Alice Cheote quitclaims all her right in part of a tenement and that of the curtilage in Mill Street.

<sup>108</sup> Maryanne Kowaleski, 'The History of Urban Families in Medieval England', *Journal of Medieval History*, 14 (1988), pp. 47-63.

<sup>109</sup> Further discussion on this can be found in Derek Keene, 'Landlords, the Property Market and Urban Development in Medieval England', in Finn-Einar Eliassen and Geir Atle Ersland (eds.), *Power, Profit and Urban Land: Land-Ownership in Medieval and Early Modern Northern Towns* (Aldershot: Scolar Press, 1996), pp. 93-119.

<sup>110</sup> LLGC/NLW, Pitchford Hall (Ottley) Papers.



The tenorial ladder seen in Bridgnorth can be used as a means to investigate social status. At the top of society were the tenants-in-chief, followed by “innovative rentiers” who profited from the majority residing at the lower levels of society. By focusing on Edmund Pitchford, we can gain an insight into the economic factors of the middling sort. These people conducted business that combined and strengthened their networks through urban relationships which can be reflected in the civic and political rule of the town as identified in chapters 1 and 2. The tenorial ladders of the middling sort strengthened their collective and illustrate another facet of their networks, their property partnerships. The names of those mentioned in the grants, such as the Canne and Page families, illustrate the immediate social circle of the Pitchford family and the prospering middling sort of Bridgnorth; along with other leading families within Bridgnorth, they also reveal the connections between them. Richard de Mughale and John de Longe, from whom Edmund rented property, were close to the Pitchford family, as Edmund’s mother, Johanna, chose them as executors for her will.<sup>111</sup>

The very nature of the tenorial ladder could also be a reflection of the entrepreneurially wealthy who, like Edmund’s father, Nicholas, came from the wealthy merchant class which began to emerge in the thirteenth century. This merchant class also accommodated a wool trade ‘middleman’ who operated in the localities and like the subtenants acted as a go-between from one rung to another, making profit from both.<sup>112</sup> Jenny Kermode noted in her study of merchants in York, Beverley and Hull that descendants of merchants often appear to have become rentier participants who turned to investments in land, annuities and urban property in the same manner as that demonstrated by Edmund Pitchford in Bridgnorth.<sup>113</sup> A rental income could be reasonably consistent and even in circumstances where a property’s value fell, it could still provide an income or the potential for quick sale. What is of interest is that the members of Bridgnorth’s middling sort had always utilised the land around them for rental and as the town developed, this was transferred from grants in

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<sup>111</sup> *CPR*, IX, p. 69.

<sup>112</sup> Eileen Power, *The English Wool Trade in English Medieval History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1941); Thrupp, *Merchant Class*.

<sup>113</sup> Kermode, *Medieval Merchants*, pp. 29-30.

fee farms, where the grantor's fee was farmed by others, to tenements. The principle of renting and subletting tenements was the same as that of fee farms, where a landlord's purpose was to gain a regular income from property rather than undergo the encumbrance of managing it himself. This view of Bridgnorth's property market offers an image of the urban development of Bridgnorth and the commercial enterprises of those inhabitants wealthy enough to partake in it. It also corresponds to one of the criteria of the middling sort in this study – being active in the deeds in ten or more property transactions.

### **Where one lived**

The mapping of where the residents of Bridgnorth may have lived can be taken from the above evidence. A tenurial ladder creates an understanding of the social position of the individual who sublet tenements. A person's social position can also be seen by the location and style of properties they held as well as how many. Those wealthy enough to occupy the upper rungs of the ladder were more likely to live away from a multi-occupied residence and this could demonstrate a person's social position projected through the style of property they lived in.

Prior to his marriage to Alice Rondulph, Nicholas Pitchford's son, Edmund, received many grants of land and property from Alice's father, John Rondulph, in what appeared to be her dowry. Among these gifts were a number of tenements in the town. An example of this, from 1341, is a grant for a tenement in High Street, alongside an annual rent of 2s. from another tenement in the same street and sublet from Edmund's brother, William.<sup>114</sup> John also granted to Edmund and Alice a tenement in High Street between those of William de la Hulle and Simon le Goldsmyth.<sup>115</sup> These tenements were granted along with lands outside of the town, including a piece of land called 'La Helde' in a field called 'Churchfield', in addition to a rent from land lying adjacent to it in the tenure of William Kyssesone.<sup>116</sup> All of these properties and the land immediately placed Edmund on tenurial ladders, but the grants suggest that none of them would be his main residence as they state that he held them in tenure.

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<sup>114</sup> LLGC/NLW, Pitchford Hall (Ottley) Papers, deed 58, John Rondulph's grants to Alice and Edmund.

<sup>115</sup> LLGC/NLW, Pitchford Hall (Ottley) Papers, deed 58.

<sup>116</sup> LLGC/NLW, Pitchford Hall (Ottley) Papers, deed 58.

A grant from John Rondulph could relate to the home of Edmund and Alice, as it did not state that Edmund should receive rents from it. The grant appears to have been connected to her family as it stated that if both should die with no heirs, the land should return to the grantor. This is called fee tail which essentially meant that it was granted to B and the heirs of his body, with the condition that should B die without an heir of his body the land would revert to A. Grants of this type became common in medieval England, particularly after the 1285 statute *De Donis Conditionalibus*, which imposed restrictions on a grantee's ability to alienate the land and intended that the land was inherited lineally.<sup>117</sup> This can be seen to be as much a matter of maintaining the family property as it was for maintaining the family status that was associated with it. However, according to Susan Staves, the understanding of the role of family under such inheritance patterns has been hampered by the restricted approach of some historians.<sup>118</sup> This critique is relevant here, as Staves has argued that historians have ignored the gendered social dynamics of family relationships which are revealed by such inheritance practices and treated the family as an overly simplistic economic unit.<sup>119</sup> In reference to daughters, here Alice, receiving family land in fee tail, Staves demonstrates that patrimonial inheritance strategies did achieve the preservation of estates and kept them within the family, but in the context of a gendered and unequal conception of family relations. Here we see the gendered context of inheritance which Staves suggested in the grant of the fee farm of a messuage of lands in the fee of Tasley, which is part of a larger estate of Astley Abbots, with a rent of 1d. annually for Edmund to pay to the lord of the manor.<sup>120</sup> Although this plot of land was not the only piece of land John Rondulph granted to the couple prior to their marriage, it was the only one covered by a clause of this kind.<sup>121</sup> As well as the Astley Abbots land, which was to remain Rondulph land, no reversion clause for these properties was included, presumably because they were not family land. This land appears to have been in the

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<sup>117</sup> Joseph Biancalana, *The Fee Tail and the Common Recovery in Medieval England, 1176-1502* (Cambridge: Cambridge University press, 2001). This is also seen in LLGC/NLW, Pitchford Hall (Ottley) Papers, deed 320.

<sup>118</sup> Susan Staves, *Married Women's Separate Property in England, 1660-1833* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), pp. 203-206.

<sup>119</sup> Staves, *Married Women*.

<sup>120</sup> LLGC/NLW, Pitchford Hall (Ottley) Papers, deed 57, grant of a fee farm in Tasley.

<sup>121</sup> LLGC/NLW, Pitchford Hall (Ottley) Papers, deeds 404, 26, 58, and 27 show grants from John Rondulph to Edmund Pitchford and Alice Rondulph prior to their marriage.

Rondulph family for some generations and Alice's Grandfather, Nicholas's, purchase of the land is discussed in appendix 8.

Whether or not Edmund and Alice lived in this property cannot be confirmed, but it does suggest they lived outside of the town and that, by contrast, the town properties were investments and this was part of the Rondulph inheritance. Within the deeds, there was one other similar grant which can be confidently identified as including a clause for land to remain in the family. The grant from Reginald de la Hay to Alice, daughter of Fremund Erditon, was for lands and tenements received by Reginald and given as a gift to Alice in the fields of Bridgnorth opposite Quatford.<sup>122</sup> It was noted that Alice's son, Hugh, and the rightful heirs of Reginald should have the remainder of lands; unfortunately, no further deeds shed light upon the descent of this land.<sup>123</sup> This evidence suggests that the middling sort were unwilling to be alienated from property and it was not uncommon for a marriage portion to be purchased alongside family land, specifically for the marriage. This could be in the form of tenements, as seen in the example offered in relation to John Rondulph, which demonstrates this social group's desire to safeguard their own rights as much as the gentry and nobility. Alice's husband to be, Edmund Pitchford, was a younger son and, as McNamara noted, younger sons were more generally unlikely to inherit their father's business in the wool trade. For Edmund, his marriage to Alice Rondulph could therefore have offered him financial as well as social stability and landed wealth.

The expansion of the town and the development of market areas increased the need for housing away from the main tenements and pushed development outside of the central hub. The area of High Town in Bridgnorth saw suburbs grow along roads from the town gates, outside of Whitburn Street and the North Gates, encroaching on the town ditch, now Moat Street. These areas have been considered by Croom to be an 'organic' development instead of a planned expansion.<sup>124</sup> The developing suburbs appeared to have been planned outside of the West Gate in the area called 'Little

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<sup>122</sup> LLGC/NLW, Pitchford Hall (Ottley) Papers, deed 1245.

<sup>123</sup> LLGC/NLW, Pitchford Hall (Ottley) Papers, deed 1245.

<sup>124</sup> Croom, 'Topographic Analysis', p. 29; LLGC/NLW, Pitchford Hall (Ottley) Papers, deed 102 and 371, description of Whitburn Gate; deed 171 and 1530, description of Northgate.

Brugg', now Pound Street.<sup>125</sup> Suburban growth can also be observed along Cartway and Underhill Street outside of Cowgate, concentrating dwellings in the area, possibly due to its proximity to the river for trade and transport.<sup>126</sup> In her study of western Berkshire, Margaret Yates identified the individuals who resided in the suburbs to assess their rural-urban relationships.<sup>127</sup> Her study showed that those who resided there were mainly a wealthy group of rural inhabitants who had invested in freehold tenancies in the town.<sup>128</sup> In the case of Bridgnorth, William le Goldsmyth, Walter Wodecock and Edmund Pitchford all appeared to live in this area.<sup>129</sup> Although she noted that suburbs were not a new phenomenon, Yates's study highlights the active members of the property market in the suburbs, which is reflected in the actions of Bridgnorth's wealthier middling sort.

### **Property accumulation**

As well as living in the "suburbs", some of the middling sort gathered property within the town. Although he did not live in the main streets of the town, Edmund Pitchford is one of many examples of the middling sort holding tenements in the town that were located in close proximity to each other. Here we see that it was not only one member of a family who would hold properties in proximity to each other, but that a family as a whole would hold an interest in a group of properties in order to strengthen the urban estate of the family. In 1344, we see that Edmund granted a house and curtilage in Whitbourne Street near a tenement held by his brother, Robert, while reserving part of it which lay near the tenement of his mother Johanna.<sup>130</sup> In 1343, Edmund granted to Matilda Page a tenement in Whitbourne Street between one previously held by his mother and one held by his brother, Robert. Unsurprisingly, his brothers Nicholas and William and his father-in-law, John Rondulph, all witnessed the grant, with William Pitchford acting as bailiff.<sup>131</sup> Edmund held a number of tenements in

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<sup>125</sup> LLGC/NLW, Pitchford Hall (Ottley) Papers, Little Brugg, deed 185.

<sup>126</sup> LLGC/NLW, Pitchford Hall (Ottley) Papers, Railway Street, deed 53, Cartway and Underhill Street, deeds 425, 4, and 48.

<sup>127</sup> Yates, *Town and Countryside*, p. 117.

<sup>128</sup> Yates, *Town and Countryside*, p. 117.

<sup>129</sup> LLGC/NLW, Pitchford Hall (Ottley) Papers, deeds 31, 4, and 510.

<sup>130</sup> LLGC/NLW, Pitchford Hall (Ottley) Papers, deed 24.

<sup>131</sup> LLGC/NLW, Pitchford Hall (Ottley) Papers, deed 24.

Whitbourne Street and between 1340 and 1349 there are ten surviving deeds where Edmund is either the grantor or the grantee of tenements in this street.<sup>132</sup>

Whereas Edmund was building his urban estate in the 1340s and focusing his attention on the newly developing streets of Bridgnorth, we see this practice in the earlier decades of the study period by Fremund Erditon, as previously noted. Fremund Erditon was the most frequent witness in the deeds between 1301-1310 and an active party in the earlier decades of the fourteenth century, which is reflected in the land he held an interest in. As Figure 8 above demonstrates, the type of land that was commonly transferred changes through the study period from land located outside of the town in estates and near or in the castle grounds to tenements and dwellings which were focused in the newly developing streets. Just as has been described above in the case of Edmund Pitchford, the middling sort tended to buy land or tenements situated close together in order to build an urban estate. Fremund also did this, highlighting the transition to newly available land in the developing township of the middle decades of the fourteenth century. Fremund focused on land and plots in the castle which were located next to each other and areas in the same field, as well as on land on the estate of Astley Abbots, all of which were granted to him within a five-year period. The most numerous of the grants to Fremund are those in the field called 'le Hay', which was commonly described as 'opposite Quatford', and was seen most often in the early phase of Bridgnorth's development. As the century progressed, other fields began to dominate transfers, suggesting le Hay lay in an area of Bridgnorth's hinterland. Here we see eight grants of land to Fremund varying in measurement from a messuage and a nook, eight selions and an area of arable land.<sup>133</sup>

There are only three grants relating to land in the castle, but they all took place within a single year. This demonstrates how the castle transitioned from a military base into commercial land for purchase by the townspeople, as two of the grants are for a messuage and the third for a tenement in the castle's grounds.<sup>134</sup> The remaining

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<sup>132</sup> LLGC/NLW, Pitchford Hall (Ottley) Papers, deeds 404, 361, 27, 15, 162, 23, 24, 11, 20, and 207.

<sup>133</sup> LLGC/NLW, Pitchford Hall (Ottley) Papers, deeds 1252, 1143, 1304, 1262, 1144, 1303, 55, and 1145, Fremund Erditon purchasing land in 'le Hay' field opposite Quatford.

<sup>134</sup> LLGC/NLW, Pitchford Hall (Ottley) Papers, deeds 499, 444, and 498, Fremund acquiring land in the castle.

two grants are for messuages in the manor of Astley Abbots, which Fremund was clearly leasing and paid rent for, the first messuage 4s. annually and 18d. for the second to the lord, which is in contrast to town tenements which are not under any lordship.<sup>135</sup> Fremund had the same intentions as the middling sort in the middle decades of this study, but where they mainly focused their attentions on town based tenements, Fremund focused on areas available to him in this earlier phases of town development. This illustrates how the availability of land in Bridgnorth slowly changed.

A member of Bridgnorth's middling sort who displayed similar patterns of property acquisition was John Canne. The case study of his property accumulation followed the pattern suggested by Hoskins, namely that in order for an individual to achieve an urban estate, he or she would need to buy land piece by piece.<sup>136</sup> It was unlikely that John lived in these tenements. He would have seen them as investments and the deeds refer to land outside of Bridgnorth which John also owned and where he may have resided. The majority of John's property acquisitions occurred during the peak period of property transactions in Bridgnorth.<sup>137</sup>

John Canne also appeared to hold an interest in a certain area of town, either for trade purposes or capital investment through the acquisition of tenements and property in *Mulnестreet* (Mill Street), as noted above.<sup>138</sup> From the available records, it would appear John Canne was not the first in his family to hold property or take an interest in Mill Street, as a Walter Canne held a tenement there in 1298, although Walter's relationship to John is unclear.<sup>139</sup> There is no indication of John Canne's father, Henry, granting or possessing land in Mill Street, although evidence from 1340 would suggest he once did.<sup>140</sup> In this transaction, the tenement appeared to be granted in its entirety by Edmund Pitchford's mother, Johanna, now a widow, to John, where a boundary tenement owned by Robert Cheote is stated as having been

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<sup>135</sup> LLGC/NLW, Pitchford Hall (Ottley) Papers, deeds 440 and 122, Fremund leasing land in the manor of Astley Abbots.

<sup>136</sup> Hoskins, *Local History*.

<sup>137</sup> See Appendix for table of John Canne property endeavours.

<sup>138</sup> SA, Mrs Dyas' Collection, Canne Hall and other properties of the Canne family in Mill Street and elsewhere.

<sup>139</sup> LLGC/NLW, Pitchford Hall (Ottley) Papers, deed 359, Walter Canne holding a tenement in Mill Street. In this study period, this is the earliest reference to a member of the Canne family and these properties.

<sup>140</sup> SA, Mrs Dyas' collection, deed 796/6, 1340. Reference to a tenement Henry Canne once held.

formerly owned by John's father, Henry Canne.<sup>141</sup> The only reference to an active party in property transactions was a grant made to William de Ashbourne and his wife Sibil for an acre of land in an area of Bridgnorth called 'Hokefield' in 1327.<sup>142</sup>

The period of John Canne's property interests in Mill Street, as far as can be determined from the available deeds, began in 1340, and are noted further in appendix 7. The first surviving evidence of John Canne's property interests are when Johanna Pitchford granted him a tenement in its entirety with all appurtenances, next to one he already held.<sup>143</sup> The tenement to one side of this was held by Robert Cheote, whose daughter, Alice, quitclaimed all her right to its curtilage to John Canne in 1351.<sup>144</sup> It was between the years of 1349 and 1355 that John appears to have acquired most of his tenements in Mill Street; here his activities coincide, with a general upward trend for property accumulation before a steep decline in the following decades as shown in previous chapters. In 1349, Thomas le Rede confirmed a grant to John Canne of a tenement in Mill Street which he once held of the chief lord.<sup>145</sup> By 1351, John Canne already held adjacent tenements in Mill Street as another quitclaim from Thomas le Rede proves. In this, Thomas quitclaimed all his right to a tenement, on either side of which were tenements John already held.<sup>146</sup> By 1355, John Canne held a number of tenements in Bridgnorth which he sub-let. Nicholas Pitchford, the merchant Nicholas Pitchford's son and Edmund's brother, quitclaimed his right to a tenement and land in Mill Street which John already held and which had formerly belonged to John's father, Henry Canne.<sup>147</sup>

Despite Bridgnorth developing into a township, it was still in a rural area and the boundary of Mill Street ended near a water spring, as evidenced in a grant from

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<sup>141</sup> SA, Mrs Dyas' collection, deed 796/6, 1340.

<sup>142</sup> SA, Mrs Dyas' collection, deed 796/4, dated 1327, there is a clear impression on seal of HENRICI CANNE.

<sup>143</sup> SA, Mrs Dyas' collection, deed 796/6, dated 1340. Here, John Canne is described as a clerk.

<sup>144</sup> SA, Mrs Dyas' collection, deed 796/6, dated 1340. Robert Cheote holds a tenement in Mill Street. Mrs Dyas' Collection, deed 796/9 1351, Alice Cheote quitclaims all her right in part of a tenement and that of the curtilage in Mill Street.

<sup>145</sup> SA, Mrs Dyas' collection, deed 796/7, dated 1349, Thomas le Rede confirms tenement to John Canne.

<sup>146</sup> SA, Mrs Dyas' collection, deed 796/8, dated 1351, Thomas le Rede quitclaims his right to a tenement in Mill street between two John Canne already holds.

<sup>147</sup> SA, Mrs Dyas' Collection, deed 796/11, dated 1355, Nicholas Pitchford quitclaims his right to a tenement and land to John Canne.



Agnes, widow of William le Palmer, to John Canne, through the appointment of an attorney, Richard de Aston, which described the tenement as situated 'next to a spring'.<sup>148</sup> The land leading from Mill Street was also of interest to John, as described in 1355 when Thomas le Skynnar confirmed the grant of a tenement in Mill Street to John Canne between one tenement John already held and another held by William de Ashbourne, which extended to the highway and land John held of the chief lords.<sup>149</sup> In 1356, William de Overton exchanged his tenement in Mill Street for a tenement and land in 'Little Brugg' with John Canne.<sup>150</sup> Further information relating to the land John held outside of Mill Street and its proximity to the street can be seen in a 1361 quitclaim by Joan, widow of Robert Bergham. Joan quitclaimed her right to a tenement which John Canne already held and was situated between another tenement also in his possession which extended to his orchard; for this tenement John paid Joan for her life's warranty.<sup>151</sup> By 1356, the number of tenements in Mill Street which John held can only be estimated, but the continual acquisitions he made and the lack of evidence of their disposal clearly indicate that he already held much of the property in the Street. The available evidence shows that he held at least sixteen tenements or parts of tenements in the area by 1355.

Throughout this case study the economic and capital assets which were quickly sold and divided in one small area of Bridgnorth illustrate and demonstrate the practices of those holding and letting tenements. The case study also illustrates how rents would eventually be filtered through to the tenement holder by the process of subletting. A long-term plan to acquire land in this fashion does not appear to be uncommon and is understandable as land and property could be seen as the cornerstone of town life, playing an important role in demonstrating the status of an individual or a family.

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<sup>148</sup> SA, Mrs Dyas' Collection, deed 796/10, dated 1353, Agnes, widow of William le Palmer, through Richard de Aston, gives John Canne a tenement in Mill Street which lies next to a spring.

<sup>149</sup> SA, Mrs Dyas' collection, deed 796/12, dated 1355, Thomas le Skynnar confirms a tenement to John Canne near land John holds.

<sup>150</sup> SA, Mrs Dyas' collection, deed 796/13, dated 1356, William de Overton exchanges tenements and land with John Canne.

<sup>151</sup> SA, Mrs Dyas' collection, deed 796/14, dated 1361, Joan, widow of Robert de Bergham, gives up her right to a tenement which John already holds and leads to his orchard.

## **Building maintenance and local resources**

The style of the property a person lived in could demonstrate their social standing and their regard for the upkeep and maintenance of their environment through their adherence to urban bye-laws. Their physical environment was of importance to wealthy townspeople, which is evident through the manner in which they cared for and monitored any actions which threatened it. One such situation was a dispute between the burgesses of Bridgnorth and the Franciscan Friars, which saw an agreement between the burgesses with Roger, Prior of the Friars and its procurators and conservators over the use of a water supply in Bridgnorth.<sup>152</sup> This not only illustrates the resources which the townspeople used and how they were managed through the collective power of the burgesses, but also the social fabric of the town, which, as Jenny Kermode has noted in her work on merchant wills, saw friars as popular recipients of patronage from the middling sort and which demonstrates good relations between the two groups.

Other such care for town maintenance can be seen in evidence relating to nearby Chester. Inspections were undertaken on new building work in 1315 when Ranulf de Molendum was required to have the building of his house inspected by a delegation of the town, including the mayor and sheriff, to ascertain if any damage had been inflicted on the road or gate.<sup>153</sup> It was not only the building work by Ranulf which was inspected, but also his permit. The permit was upheld and permission to continue with building was granted.<sup>154</sup> The importance of maintaining good networks and crossings such as roads and bridges was vital to towns such as Chester and Bridgnorth as the testamentary evidence has previously demonstrated in Chapter 3, where it highlights a person's 'good work'. Regard for another's property was also taken seriously, especially as towns were becoming increasingly built up with tenements, resulting in people living in closer proximity to one another. An example of this from Bristol is a dispute over gutters in 1344, where John Pryde and William atte Ford agreed a covenant over maintenance of a gutter and wall between their

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<sup>152</sup> LLGC/NLW, Pitchford Hall (Ottley) Papers, deed 519, an agreement between burgesses and Franciscan Friars, dated 1306.

<sup>153</sup> LLGC/NLW, Pitchford Hall (Ottley) Papers, deed 576, dated 1315, Ranulf de Molendum is inspected for the building of his house.

<sup>154</sup> LLGC/NLW, Pitchford Hall (Ottley) Papers, deed 576.

tenements in Redcliffe Street.<sup>155</sup> These examples show the importance of property and civic order to the townspeople and that adherence to property maintenance was conducted by the middling sort.

This evidence not only demonstrates the care taken to maintain the town but also its local resources and how these should be maintained, as a number of deeds in the study relate. In Bridgnorth, a grant between Robert Lord of Wodecote and Roger, son of Lord Roger de Pinelisdon, not only included a fee farm but also a piece of land and water lying between the end of the grantor's land and that of Lord John de Chetwinde and the common land.<sup>156</sup> This grant was not only for the land but demonstrates the importance of a water supply, which was to be diverted to the grantor's vineries of Wodcote and a vinery at Lynden and onto the vinery of the grantee, Roger.<sup>157</sup> Roger was also to take turf from the grantor's common to complete a pond which he should repair when necessary.<sup>158</sup> This information opens a window onto the lives of Bridgnorth's inhabitants, illustrating their technological understanding of cultivation (such as the method of diverting the water supply) and the type of crops (here vineries) the area could support and clearly with some degree of success. The importance of a water supply is emphasised not only through feeding the vineries but also creating a pond, possibly for fish or as another resource and perhaps an important social marker of relative distinction.

### **Religious institutions**

Local resources were crucial for the survival of a township and, as seen in the above example, could be located on a lord's land. As major landowners, the lord would often have his own supply of such resources. Here we can focus on another major landowner of Bridgnorth's environs the church. The church's property accumulations made it a prominent landowner, and one which held interests not only in the environs of Bridgnorth but whose properties were spread throughout the town and added to Bridgnorth's property market and its economy through its interests in land cultivation. The cultivation of Bridgnorth's arable surroundings contributed to the town economy.

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<sup>155</sup> Coss, *Early Records of Medieval Coventry*, pp. 317-18.

<sup>156</sup> LLGC/NLW, Pitchford Hall (Ottley) Papers, deed 1330, dated late thirteenth century.

<sup>157</sup> LLGC/NLW, Pitchford Hall (Ottley) Papers, deed 1330.

<sup>158</sup> LLGC/NLW, Pitchford Hall (Ottley) Papers, deed 1330.

Despite the deeds focusing on the rise of town property, agriculture was the economic foundation for the area of Bridgnorth and the one upon which the town developed. This is most noticeable in the early deeds of this study period and illustrated in Figure 9 above.

It is surprising that the religious institutions of Bridgnorth and its locality have received little attention from academic studies, since they were such a prominent landowner. Where attention has been given it has mainly been through antiquarian studies. These dated studies, such as that by D. Cranage, detailed the interior of Bridgnorth's churches and surrounding towns.<sup>159</sup> Cranage focused on the fabric of the buildings and relied on earlier antiquarian studies, such as those of Eyton, who provided details of buildings which were subsequently lost, removed or altered.<sup>160</sup> However, the information offered by Cranage does create a timeline for the neglect and absence of a church's features which are now missing.

R. N. Swanson noted, based on the evidence in the deeds, that the institutional wealth of the church derived mainly from land, with one estimate that ecclesiastical institutions controlled between a fifth and a quarter of agricultural land in England by the later middle ages.<sup>161</sup> Abbeys such as Lilleshall and Buildwas could be seen to be on par with the estates of lay landowners such as the Corbets of Caus, as these abbeys had similarities to the characteristics of the aristocracy's landowning in Shropshire.<sup>162</sup> These abbeys survived the fluctuating land values of the fourteenth century and despite a decline in arable cultivation, managed to survive. Before 1349 and in 1353, the value of Lilleshall Abbey and its four granges was only sixty percent of its 1330 value, with a further sixty percent decline between 1353 and 1375. Values in 1330 saw ten carucates of demesne arable land attached to four granges with two parts under cultivation valued at £15. By 1375, there were nine carucates, of which two cultivated parts were valued at £10. A reduction in demesne meadow was also seen, from 40

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<sup>159</sup> D. H. S. Cranage, *An Architectural Account of the Churches of Shropshire* (Wellington: Hobson and Co, 1894).

<sup>160</sup> R. W. Eyton, *The Antiquities of Shropshire*, 12 vols, (London: John Russel Smith, 1814-1854), VI (1818).

<sup>161</sup> Swanson, *Church and Society*, p. 196.

<sup>162</sup> A. J. Pollard, 'Estate Management in the Later Middle Ages: The Talbots and Whitchurch, 1383-1525', *Economic History Review*, 2<sup>nd</sup> series, 25, p. 227; M. D. G. Wanklyn, 'Landed Society and Allegiance in Chester and Shropshire in Civil War' (unpublished PhD thesis, Manchester University, 1976), pp. 16-17..

acres in 1330 to 24 acres in 1375, however, the value remained constant at 1s. an acre.<sup>163</sup>

Early deeds in this study, dating from c. 1280 - c. 1300, focus on land not immediately located in the town and relate more evidently to areas connected to an abbey. A grant from 1290 outlined a fee farm in a messuage located in Bridgnorth between land held by Simon Helote, son of Roger Helote, and William Pannying lying, between a messuage held by Emma Pride and the Abbot of Buildwas.<sup>164</sup> Likewise, in 1292, the Abbot of Lilleshall Abbey was named in an agreement between Aline de Longebarue and William, son of William de Farnehales.<sup>165</sup> The agreement detailed several areas of land to be cultivated and the revenue from which Aline and William were to pay 26d. each to the Abbot of Lilleshall Abbey and 20d. to Mass of St Mary's in the Church of St Leonard in Bridgnorth.<sup>166</sup> In 1323, a remission in arrears of an annual rent of 2s., 6d. issued out of lands in Bridgnorth from the Abbot of Lilleshall to Roger de Euendas and his wife, Alice.<sup>167</sup>

Alongside the abbeys of the region, another prominent religious institution in Bridgnorth was the Hospital of Holy Trinity and St John the Baptist, which held a substantial estate in Bridgnorth, including houses in Little Brugg and St. Mary's Street.<sup>168</sup> By the late fourteenth century, the Hospital owed Lilleshall Abbey rents of 29s. ¾d. for lands in Bridgnorth. The period during the fourteenth century which saw an increase of deeds alongside the increase of property available in the town, 1317-1344, was also the period in which the Hospital acquired much of its land. The Hospital received five daily chantry services which were endowed by Bridgnorth's burgesses,

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<sup>163</sup> D. C. Cox and others, 'Domesday Book', pp. 72-118.

<sup>164</sup> LLGC/NLW, Pitchford Hall (Ottley) Papers, deed 13, abbot holding land. During the thirteenth century, new lands were acquired by the Cistercian Abbey of Buildwas from the leading local gentry, lesser freeholders, and burgesses of Shrewsbury and Bridgnorth by purchase as well as by gifts and there are some signs of an attempt to group the estates for convenience of administration.

<sup>165</sup> LLGC/NLW, Pitchford Hall (Ottley) Papers, deed 1090, agreement which outlined rent to the Abbot of Lilleshall Abbey. The Augustinian Abbey of Lilleshall also held land in Shrewsbury which grew round St. Alkmund's lands by gift and sale from the burgesses where it steadily accumulated messuages in Bridgnorth, Newport and Welshpool.

<sup>166</sup> LLGC/NLW, Pitchford Hall (Ottley) Papers, deed 1090.

<sup>167</sup> LLGC/NLW, Pitchford Hall (Ottley) Papers, deed 603, abbot of Lilleshall as a land owner.

<sup>168</sup> For deeds and leases, see TNA Website, *Discovery: Cat. Anct. D.* iii, C 3237, 3434, 3451-9, C 146/10167, 10243; SA X972/1/1/3/4/1, 6000/8864; LLGC/NLW, Pitchford Hall (Ottley) Papers, deed 1386.

although this endowment was originally intended for St. Leonard's church. In 1340, the prior of the Hospital undertook the duty to appoint the chaplains.<sup>169</sup>

Interaction between church institutions and the middling sort, in terms of land transactions, were clearly important and the Hospital gained more land in 1317, when Henry Canne gave two messuages, lands, and rents in Bridgnorth, Quatford, and Worfield.<sup>170</sup> John Huband gave two messuages and 1½ virgates in Bridgnorth and in More, located in Eardington in 1324.<sup>171</sup> In the following decade, John de Isenham gave three messuages and lands in Bridgnorth in 1335 and William de la Hulle gave one messuage, lands, and 60s. rent in Bridgnorth for a service of three chaplains in 1337.<sup>172</sup> Thomas de Holcumbe and Henry of Larden, chaplains, gave two messuages each in 1344 and William of Aldenham with two chaplains sought license to grant two further messuages in the town in 1371.<sup>173</sup> Once again, Bridgnorth's middling sort appeared as active parties in the deeds, as demonstrated through their grants, which not only secured them spiritual service but also allowed them to accumulate more property through association of their patronage when granting chantries.<sup>174</sup>

Details such as these not only inform us of the actions taken by Bridgnorth's inhabitants but also how they utilised their natural resources and the effect this had on the town's urbanisation. This information from the deeds progresses the study of the church's contribution and the effects of this on the commerce and economy of Bridgnorth's evolving urban landscape.

## Conclusion

To date, the locality of Bridgnorth has received little interest aside from a few local studies and those of religious architecture. Exceptions to this are the recent studies by Lilley and Croom, whose aim was to establish the physical growth of the medieval township. Lilley's study of Bridgnorth is part of a wider study offering examples of

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<sup>169</sup> LLGC/NLW, Pitchford Hall (Ottley) Papers, deed 2450.

<sup>170</sup> LLGC/NLW, Pitchford Hall (Ottley) Papers, deed 2450.

<sup>171</sup> TNA Website, *Discovery*: C 143/163/9; The More estate was exchanged for property in Bridgnorth in 1345; TNA Website, *Discovery*: C 143/278/9; *CPR*, VI, p. 454.

<sup>172</sup> *CPR*, III, p. 502. This endowment was originally intended for St. Leonard's church. In 1340, the prior of the hospital undertook to appoint the chaplains, LLGC/NLW, Pitchford Hall (Ottley) Papers, deed 2450. TNA Website, *Discovery*: C 143/229/4; *CPR*, III, p. 92.

<sup>173</sup> TNA Website, *Discovery*: C 143/376/4; C 143/270/16; *CPR*, VI, p. 331.

<sup>174</sup> See Chapter 3, Testamentary evidence, for details of pious patronage from Bridgnorth's people.

particular phases seen in the growth of market towns, as also evidenced at Ludlow (Shropshire) and Alnwick (Northumberland).<sup>175</sup> Further, the topographical approach of Croom provides a visual sense of the medieval town and can shed light on the individuals who resided there.<sup>176</sup> Croom and Lilley have charted the physical changes of Bridgnorth up to the end of the thirteenth century, but through an analysis of the deeds I have been able to extend that knowledge into the fourteenth century. I have demonstrated how the middling sort's outlook widened with their prosperity, which is reflected in the physical changes to their environment. Through documenting these deeds, this study has extended the knowledge of Bridgnorth's development and expansion beyond the formal planning phases of previous studies.

Through a study of Bridgnorth's urbanisation which does not solely focus on the physical elements of town growth but also on the social status of those who lived there, we can go some way to discover how this urbanisation was seen in their daily lives. For example, the deeds identify those who held property and appeared on tenurial ladders, partaking in the property market and contributing to Bridgnorth's economy. The outcome of this is of course favourable to the wealthier members of the town and, through the deeds, we can see that these wealthy inhabitants were mainly of the middling sort and comprised the majority of the landholding portion of the town's population. This placed the middling sort's status within the town, as property owners, alongside the few members of the older landed families and the church as premier landowners. This status can be seen as another example of the emulation of the middling sort of gentry practices through the manner in which they tried to create their own "urban estate".

The status and wealth the middling sort held through their position as landowners saw them invest time in the important matter of civic order. This civic order could be threatened by building developments within the town if it went against formal planning and affect the value of the middling sort's property holdings. It was therefore in their interest to enforce it by checking the building permits, demonstrating once more the level of control and governance they held over their

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<sup>175</sup> Lilley, *Urban Life*, p. 144.

<sup>176</sup> Croom, 'Topographical Analysis'.

township and environment. As the fourteenth century progressed, the development of Bridgnorth parallels the prosperity of the middling sort, which can, in part, be attributed to the middling sort utilising the varying types of landholdings available to them, be it simple or complex, leases or grants, as well as the prosperity in subletting. It can therefore be concluded that the evolving identity of the middling sort's social status was closely linked to the development of their physical environment coupled with the additional revenue already gained through trade or inheritance.



## **CHAPTER 5: WOMEN AND PROPERTY**

### **Introduction**

As in previous chapters, women are included in this investigation and this chapter focuses on their activity in the property market to demonstrate that the growth of the market town and property wealth was not purely a male occupation. The inclusion of women offers case studies of families where the disposal of property can be seen through the actions of individual women when not acting as an executrix for their husbands' property. We see here a sliding scale of visibility for men and women in the property market. Men appear in the deeds with more frequency than married women who, when widowed, appear with more frequency than unmarried women, who are under-represented in the deeds and can be difficult to trace, especially those of the middling sort. Despite this, the evidence from Bridgnorth offers fresh opportunities to draw women of the middling sort into view as they, like men, were part of the middling sort and played a role in the development of their town.

The previous chapter laid out how Bridgnorth's development came about through the appearance of a central market area and the evolution of formalised street planning with a decrease of plot size in order to accommodate these changes. The case studies and evidence presented largely focused on men. This is unsurprising, as men were the heads of households and in law, property was under their authority. Women however, also played a role in Bridgnorth's property economy, either through partnerships with their husbands or independently of male kin with no indication of their married status. Women often passively fulfilled the role of keeping property in the family through dowries and inheritance. In the following discussion, we examine these passive and active roles in the growing development of Bridgnorth.

In turning our attention to female involvement in the disposal of land, it is important to note how the different phases of a woman's life would dictate the type of role she would play. Women would find themselves involved in the disposal of property in different ways depending on whether they were married, unmarried or widowed. Evidence of women disposing of land would suggest they had an alienable right to it, but it can be hard to deduce if a woman owned or simply resided in a property; as a tenant, like men in this situation, she may not appear on tenorial

ladders. However, in this study of Bridgnorth's middling sort, the women who held property and appear in the deeds would have experienced the same living conditions and locations as the men addressed above, as they were their wives, daughters or widows.

In a study of women's property rights Richard Smith examines women's material circumstances both in and outside of marriage through manorial records between 1370-1430.<sup>1</sup> Our understanding of the political and economic consequences of property holding, as noted by Smith, has been greatly influenced by the work of Jack Goody, who commented that conjugal estates devolved to both men and women through inheritance or post-mortem endowment in all sections of society in Europe's middle ages.<sup>2</sup> Goody treated inheritance in the wider context of kinship, demography and ultimately an economic unit. Goody reflects that inheritance touched most areas of daily life and, despite status, no family was exempt from the tensions which could occur with regards inheritance.<sup>3</sup> Evidence from Bridgnorth illustrates similar results to those found by Smith for manors in the same period and concurs with the more general views of Goody.

Smith's evidence from manorial records in southern and eastern England are reflected in the findings from Bridgnorth. Smith found the number of land transfers in the fifty year period between the last quarter of the thirteenth century and the first quarter of the fourteenth century to have tripled or, in some areas, quadrupled.<sup>4</sup> Women were now brought into property transactions, which, in turn, increased their

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<sup>1</sup> Richard Smith, 'Coping with Uncertainty: Women's Tenure of Customary Land in England c. 1370-1340', in Jennifer Kermode (ed.), *Enterprise and Individuals in Fifteenth Century England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), pp. 43-68; Jack Goody, 'Inheritance, Property and Women: Some Comparative Considerations', in J. Goody, E. P. Thompson, and Joan Thirsk (eds.), *Family and Inheritance: Rural Society in Western Europe 1200-1800* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976), pp. 10-36.

<sup>2</sup> Jack Goody, Joan Thirsk, and E. P. Thompson (eds.), *Family and Inheritance: Rural Society in Western Europe, 1200-1800* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976).

<sup>3</sup> Jack Goody, Joan Thirsk, and E. P. Thompson (eds.), *Family and Inheritance: Rural Society in Western Europe, 1200-1800* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976).

<sup>4</sup> Smith, 'Coping with Uncertainty', p. 44.

visibility in the deeds as joint participation in the growing land market was required and recorded.<sup>5</sup>

## **Jointures**

In this section, we look at husbands and wives acting together in land transfers and the changes to the law which could benefit and disadvantage a wife following these jointures. Common law on women's property actions changed between 1250 and 1330 and we can identify these changes through evidence gathered from the Bridgnorth deeds for the same period where husbands and wives are recorded as acting together. An increase of jointures was also observed by Carolyn Clarke between 1277 and 1325 in her study of Chesterton near Cambridge. Clarke found an increase of nine to ten percent in husband and wife pairs over this period.<sup>6</sup> Two notable changes took place for women's property rights.

The first change was a wife's acceptance of land transfers made by her husband over the course of their marriage. By the third decade of the fourteenth century, the practice of examining a wife in order to establish her agreement to the sale or grant of land, which she and her husband held joint rights over, was adopted.<sup>7</sup> As seen in Figure 15 below, it was not just the number of grants received and made by husbands and wives through jointure that increased in the fourteenth century, but the visibility of women acting independently as active parties in the Bridgnorth deeds. This is partly due to the duties that fell to widows through the act of executing their husbands' wills, but also the second change to women's property rights which occurred at this time, which is discussed below the figure.

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<sup>5</sup> Richard Smith, 'Women's Property Rights under Customary Law: Some Developments in the Thirteenth and Fourteenth Centuries', *The Royal Historical Society*, 5<sup>th</sup> series, 36 (1986), pp. 156-94.

<sup>6</sup> Carolyn Clarke, 'Peasant Society and Land Transactions in Chesterton, Cambridgeshire, 1277-1325' (unpublished D. Phil. thesis, University of Oxford, 1985), p. 183.

<sup>7</sup> Smith, 'Coping with Uncertainty', p. 44; Smith, 'Women's Property Rights', pp. 156-94.

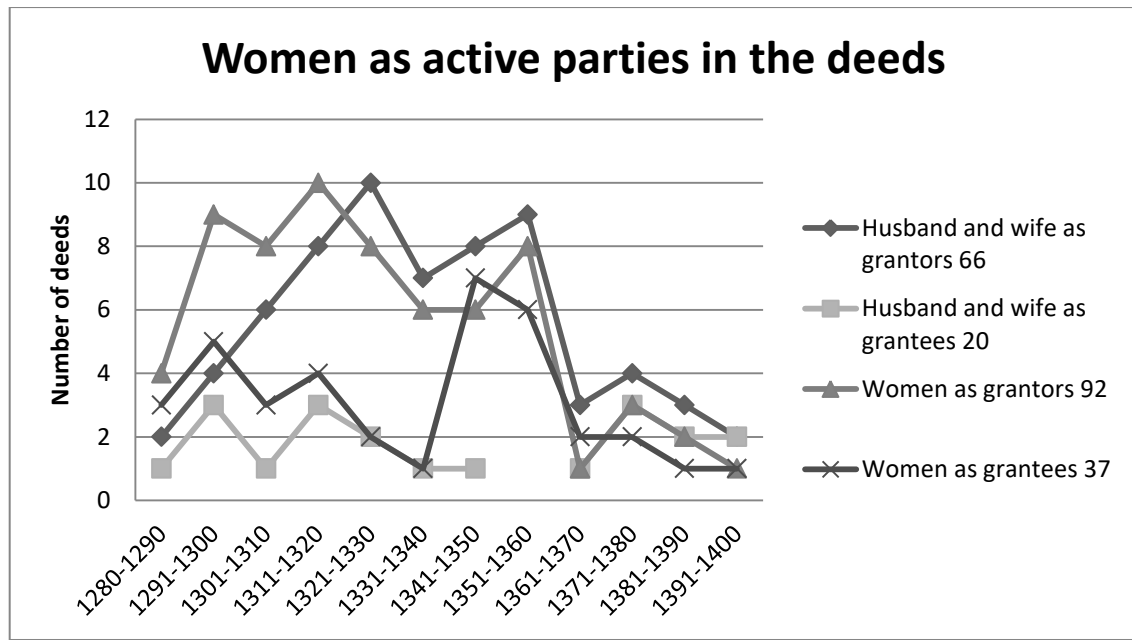


Figure 15 Women as active parties in the deeds, Bridgnorth, 1280-1400<sup>8</sup>

The second notable change for women in the property market was that substantial freeholders began to practise jointure.<sup>9</sup> It was here that the clause for the disposal of land following a couple's death began to take hold, as seen in the case of John Rondulph granting land to his daughter, Alice, and husband to be, Edmund, which is discussed above.<sup>10</sup> This jointure produced joint life tenancy for the donee (commonly, but not exclusively, the husband) and the donor's spouse with the remainder granted to the named child of the marriage or to the couple's heirs.<sup>11</sup> The joint grant to a couple could hold disadvantages for women if they found themselves widowed, as such a grant could include a remainder clause stating that the land should pass to the couple's heirs. This would limit the freedom of a widow or widower to dispose of the property if they had surviving children, which restricted their options, although it did also protect them and their children from alienation of the land.<sup>12</sup>

<sup>8</sup> LLGC/NLW, Pitchford Hall (Ottley) Papers.

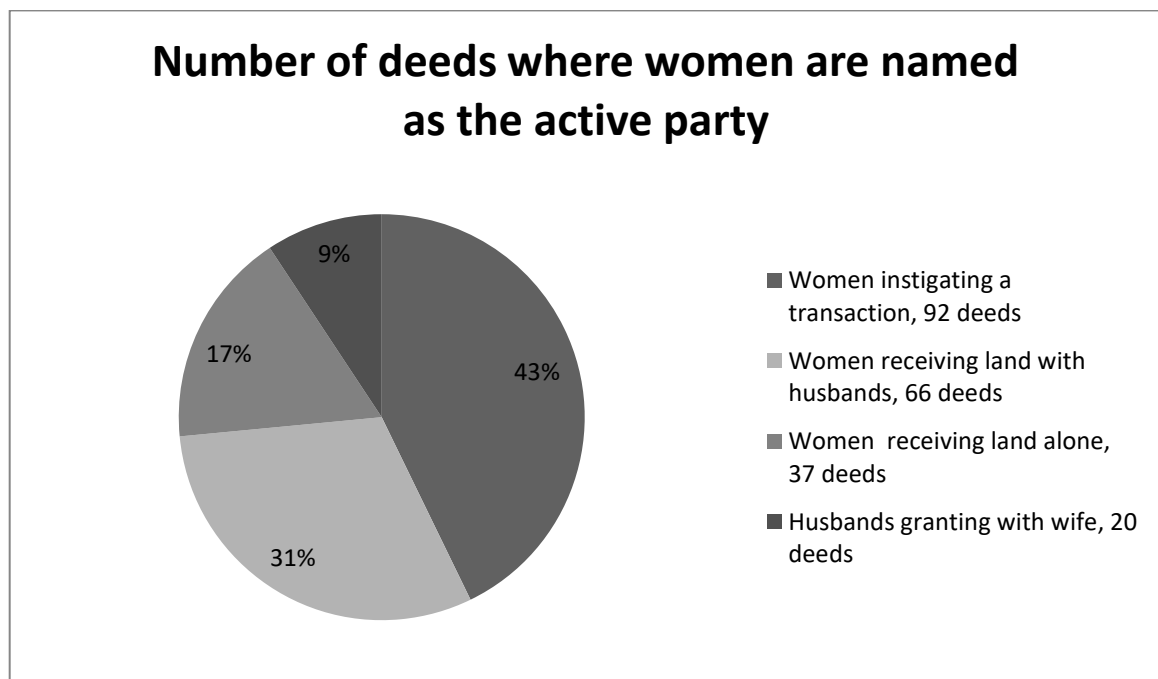
<sup>9</sup> Smith, 'Coping with Uncertainty', p. 44; K. B. Macfarlane, *The Nobility of Later Medieval England* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1978), p. 65; Smith, 'Women's Property Rights', p. 190.

<sup>10</sup> LLGC/NLW, Pitchford Hall (Ottley) Papers, deed 57, John Rondulph granting land to Edmund Pitchford and John's daughter Alice prior to their marriage.

<sup>11</sup> Smith, 'Women's Property Rights', p. 190.

<sup>12</sup> LLGC/NLW, Pitchford Hall (Ottley) Papers, deed 1354.

If we compare the deeds where a couple granted land to deeds where they sold or leased land or property, another level of the property market and a woman's role in it becomes visible. The Bridgnorth deeds demonstrate that there was not only an increase in couples acting together in the total number of land transfers, but there was an increase specifically in the number of couples who granted, sold or leased land, relative to the number of couples who received land together. During the period studied, seventy-six percent of the joint transactions involved married couples acting as grantors. In an example from 1317, Nicholas Pitchford and William de Ashbourne, with the consent of their wives, granted land to Robert Carpenter and his wife, Sibil.<sup>13</sup> This pattern is seen widely during the later decades of the thirteenth century and early decades of the fourteenth and was also observed by Smith.<sup>14</sup> Judith Bennett also recognised this in her study of Brigstock, where eighty percent of the transactions by married couples involved property disposal rather than acquisition.<sup>15</sup>



**Figure 16 Women as active parties in the deeds, Bridgnorth, 1280-1400 (pie chart)**<sup>16</sup>

<sup>13</sup> LLGC/NLW, Pitchford Hall (Ottley) Papers, deed 353.

<sup>14</sup> LLGC/NLW, Pitchford Hall (Ottley) Papers, deed 353; Smith, 'Coping with Uncertainty', p. 57; Smith 'Women's Property Rights', p. 185, n. 72.

<sup>15</sup> Judith M. Bennett, *Women in the Medieval English Countryside: Gender and Household in Brigstock before the Plague* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987).

<sup>16</sup> LLGC/NLW, Pitchford Hall (Ottley) Papers; SA, Mrs Dyas' Collection.

Of the 685 deeds examined in this study, 215 include the activity of women in the property market, as broken down further in Figure 16 above, where we see the type of transactions in which women were most commonly involved. Women are seen as grantors of land more commonly than in any other type of property transaction, which can be attributed to their visibility mainly when disposing of their husbands' property as executrices of their will. In other words, they are fulfilling a legal duty and not partaking in Bridgnorth's property market in the same manner as men did in the case studies and evidence in Chapter 4.

Of the 215 deeds which included women, as shown in Figure 16, ninety two have women as active parties as land grantors. Sixty-six deeds show wives receiving property with their husbands, such as Alice le Zaywar who received a tenement in Hungrey Street, Bridgnorth, with her husband Henry, in jointure as discussed above.<sup>17</sup> This would suggest that such land grants came into the marriage equally, but it would, of course, be the husband, as head of the household, who could freely dispose of the land. Of the deeds examined here, twenty deeds were husbands granting land with the consent of their wives, just as Thomas de Aston Ayer did with his wife, Alice's, consent in 1317.<sup>18</sup> The accepted interpretation of this is that common law doctrine restricted wives, under guardianship of their husbands, from entering into economic contracts in their own right, which could be misinterpreted in a modern sense as a wife's subservience to her husband. Margot Finn notes a husband's hold over his wife's free agency, which she described as the 'law of necessities'. She stated that a wife was 'allowed to make contracts on their own behalf for necessities, as agents of their husbands'.<sup>19</sup> However, Cordelia Beattie cautioned that the definition of agency entailed the husband giving his wife permission to enter into contracts.<sup>20</sup>

Much research into the rights of a married woman's ability to act as her husband's agent or of her own free will has been carried out by legal historians. Over a

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<sup>17</sup> LLGC/NLW, Pitchford Hall (Ottley) Papers, deed 490.

<sup>18</sup> LLGC/NLW, Pitchford Hall (Ottley) Papers, deed 154.

<sup>19</sup> M. Finn, 'Women, Consumption and Coverture in England', *The Historical Journal*, 39 (1996), pp. 703-22.

<sup>20</sup> Cordelia Beattie, 'Married Women, Contracts and Coverture in Late Medieval England', in Cordelia Beattie and Matthew Stevens (eds.), *Married Women and the Law in Premodern Northwest Europe* (Suffolk: Boydell Press, 2013), pp. 133-155.

century ago, Frederick Maitland and Frederick Pollock described a married woman's position under common law as follows: "during marriage, the wife was unable to contract on her own behalf; she could only contract as her husband's agent".<sup>21</sup> While the law of coverture thus rather restricted the legal rights of a wife, the evidence from Bridgnorth would suggest the lived experience of its residents was a more equal partnership, albeit one operating within the structure of marriage laws. Rowena Archer suggested that there was mutual support and cooperation between the relations of husbands and wives of the landholding classes, where a woman's property rights, for example, could not be isolated from their social setting.<sup>22</sup>

In the social setting of Bridgnorth, evidence shows it was not uncommon for women to receive land alone, whether married or not, but their marital status is not always clear and can be difficult to determine due to the deeds' diplomatic format. This is demonstrated in the case of Johanna Pitchford, who received land independently of her husband, Nicholas, in 1329.<sup>23</sup> Her marital status is not stated in the deed. She was simply addressed by name and her status as married would have gone unnoticed if there had not been prior and later transactions relating to both her and Nicholas.<sup>24</sup> Nicholas and Johanna appeared together for the first time in the surviving deeds in 1317, with William de Ashbourne and his wife Sibill.<sup>25</sup> Subsequently, in 1323 and 1324, Nicholas and Joanna received three acres of land from John Pryde.<sup>26</sup> These brief pieces of evidence would suggest that Nicholas and Johanna were, within the context of their community and status, sharing a responsibility for joint property, which appeared to be granted to them both.

Acting jointly can be seen as an important declaration, not only of a joint responsibility but also of power and authority. However, when Johanna was granted a

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<sup>21</sup> Pollock and Maitland, *History of English Law*, p. 405.

<sup>22</sup> Rowena Archer, "'How ladies who live on the manor ought to manage their households and estates': Women as Landholders and Administrators in the Later Middle Ages", in P. J. P. Goldberg (ed.), *Woman is a Worthy Wight: Women in English Society c. 1200-1500* (Gloucestershire: Alan Sutton, 1992), pp. 149-181.

<sup>23</sup> LLGC/NLW, Pitchford Hall (Ottley) Papers, deed 539, dated 1329, Johanna Pitchford received a grant of a parcel of land from John, Son of Richard Croke.

<sup>24</sup> LLGC/NLW, Pitchford Hall (Ottley) Papers, deed 539.

<sup>25</sup> LLGC/NLW, Pitchford Hall (Ottley) Papers, deed 353.

<sup>26</sup> LLGC/NLW, Pitchford Hall (Ottley) Papers, deed 248, Nicholas and Johanna Pitchford receive a tenement in Bridgnorth from Richard, son of William de la More, dated 1323; LLGC/NLW, Pitchford Hall (Ottley) Papers, deed 586, dated 1324.

parcel of land from John, son of Richard Croke, in 1329, it appeared to be granted to her alone.<sup>27</sup> The land was situated outside the gate of Whitburn Street and later, in 1340, Nicholas Pitchford was granted 'a parcel of land in the same place next to land he already held', with no reference to the land Johanna had been granted.<sup>28</sup> This could imply that the land which came to Johanna during her marriage was now considered to be Nicholas's. However, these pieces of evidence would suggest that Nicholas and Johanna did share an interest in their joint property even though the law refers to the land received by Johanna as belonging to Nicholas as he was the head of the household. In this particular instance, we see Johanna receiving land, but it was also not uncommon for middling-sort women to act as grantors.

Though the evidence shows a noticeable increase in jointure in Bridgnorth, as seen in Figure 15, the more formalised approach of examining the wife in joint transactions could be seen as a safeguard for an individual's rights, which therefore could become more secure as an outcome of this process.<sup>29</sup> This meant that acquiring land in jointure meant women who received land in this way could be in a far more beneficial position when compared to for example a dowager, as land received in jointure would automatically go to the surviving spouse. When land was left in dower, the wife commonly held it for a life's interest. Holding land in jointure could also mean that the spouses held it heritably and with powers of alienation if no condition had been set in the original grant.<sup>30</sup>

However positive the effect of joint tenure may appear to have been in terms of widows' rights, we have to be mindful of more negative consequences. In particular, if a grant was made without formally being recorded as dower, this could undermine a widow's security of the land or property as she may not be entitled to it following her husband's death. Receiving land jointly could also impact a widow's dower. No dower could come from land in joint tenancies as the husband did not have sole hold of it in order to give it to his wife in his estate. Tenure in jointure could

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<sup>27</sup> LLGC/ NLW, Pitchford Hall (Ottley) Papers, deed 539, dated 1329. Johanna Pitchford received a parcel of land.

<sup>28</sup> LLGC/ NLW, Pitchford Hall (Ottley) Papers, deed 361, dated 1340, Nicholas receives a parcel of land.

<sup>29</sup> Smith, 'Coping with Uncertainty', p. 56.

<sup>30</sup> Smith, 'Coping with Uncertainty', pp. 58-59; Smith, 'Women's Property Rights', p. 191.



therefore effectively to bar a widow's right to dower. This consequence does not appear to have been experienced in all instances, suggesting that an increase in life tenancies and the land market could have been potentially damaging to a widow's material circumstances; conversely, jointure could also mean that a widow gained a 'more honourable estate'.

The specific endowments made by husbands to their wives' dower must be considered in relation to the changes in women's participation in land transfers from the end of the thirteenth century through to the middle decades of the fourteenth. The importance of a woman's dower and her right to it may be demonstrated through the changing manner in which wives became more involved in land transaction through jointure, as discussed above. A noticeable outcome of this throughout the study period, also noted in Smith's work, was the increase of women, presumably the surviving beneficiaries of jointure, acting alone as grantors or sellers of property; such women were predominantly widows.<sup>31</sup> This group of women involved in land transfers appeared to grant more land than unmarried women. In sixty seven of the 215 deeds involving women, it can be confirmed that the female grantor was widowed. In thirty-seven deeds, no marital status or male relation was mentioned and only in three cases the women were listed as unmarried daughters.<sup>32</sup>

### **Land kept in the family through dowries and dower**

Distinguishing between the elements of a woman's own property allows us to see what they held independently when granting land which was not land or property they were granting as an executrix of their husband's will or what was given in jointure. An example of this from Bridgnorth concerns Matilda, widow of Richard, son of Thomas de Northwode, in 1300, when she granted a moiety of land to Richard Brun de la Wodehus, which was 'in her dower'.<sup>33</sup> Additionally, in 1315, Mabel, widow of William de Chester, from Chester, released from her dower a tenement on Northgate Street in the city of Chester.<sup>34</sup> The discussion now turns to a woman's dowry and a wife's dower as presented through the Bridgnorth deeds.

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<sup>31</sup> Smith, 'Coping with Uncertainty', pp. 58-59; Smith, 'Women's Property Rights', p. 191.

<sup>32</sup> Smith, 'Coping with Uncertainty', p. 59.

<sup>33</sup> LLGC/NLW, Pitchford Hall (Ottley) Papers, deed 967.

<sup>34</sup> LLGC/NLW, Pitchford Hall (Ottley) Papers, deed 2439.

When land was passed on through women and not immediately inherited by an elder son, it was often in the form of dowries. Dowries were a way of not only maintaining the family lineage, but were also imperative to maintaining land within the family. As such, women would act as a bridge to ensure the land stayed in the family for the next generation. There are fifteen references to dower or dowries in the deeds, either given in the grant or mentioned in the content of the deed. One of the earliest deeds in this study, from the late thirteenth century, exposed a line of succession where the land remained in the family by granting it to women in their dowries.<sup>35</sup> William, son of William de Canter, released land to his sister, Sibil, which William Bolding had given to the grantor's father upon his marriage to the grantor's mother, Christina.<sup>36</sup> This brief outline of a family tree illustrates how land was maintained in a family through marriage, as the grantor's grandfather, William Bolding, gave this land to William's father and mother as part of her dowry and, through the release to his sister, Sibil, William preserved it within the family. All the while women are passive in these transactions.<sup>37</sup>

Two other deeds of note follow the line of land in dowries from the early years of this study. In the early fourteenth century, Richard, son of Richard Marescall de Elton granted to Richard, son of Roger de Thorperleg and Matilda, the grantor's daughter, a fee farm of two selions in the vill, for a rent of 1 pence.<sup>38</sup> Also, in 1300, Matilda, widow of Richard, son of Thomas de Norwode, granted a moiety of land, which was in her dower, as well as one messuage, one hook and three acres which belonged to her husband Roger Brun de la Wodehouse.<sup>39</sup> The early date of this grant is typical of the period, as previously noted land granted was often located outside the newly developed township in the early decades of Bridgnorth's development.

These early deeds represent cases where women were not described as the main parties in the deed and are connected to the land in question by name only, reaffirming their passive role in the movement of land. A further example of this can

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<sup>35</sup> LLGC/NLW, Pitchford Hall (Ottley) Papers, deed 320,

<sup>36</sup> LLGC/NLW, Pitchford Hall (Ottley) Papers, deed 320, land passed down.

<sup>37</sup> LLGC/NLW, Pitchford Hall (Ottley) Papers, deed 320.

<sup>38</sup> LLGC/NLW, Pitchford Hall (Ottley) Papers, deed 494.

<sup>39</sup> LLGC/NLW, Pitchford Hall (Ottley) Papers, deed 967.

be seen when Guy de Glaseney granted land in a field of Bridgnorth opposite Quatford, a third of which his mother, Catherine, held as her dower.<sup>40</sup> The reference to Catherine in the deed establishes who held the land and where it came from rather than identifying her as a significant individual.

A further deed, dated 1298, saw Andrew Bolding grant a messuage to William Robert de Ludlow and his wife Sibil. The messuage was situated on the High Street of Bridgnorth and a piece of land near a messuage bought off Robert son of Hammond le Palmer and of the gift of Seyena, the grantor's mother.<sup>41</sup> The deed further details land lying outside of Bridgnorth with a boundary near the orchard which the grantor, Andrew, had received from his mother, Seyena.<sup>42</sup> This evidence appears to place the Boldings in the social status of the landed estate whose presence is more evident in earlier deeds which focused on land outside of the town. This land was typically granted by a smaller range of families and individuals, compared to the influx of persons partaking in the property market and tenement holdings of the later fourteenth century. The land Seyena passed to her son could be her dowry or in her dower if she was now widowed, although that is not stated. This land was either left to Andrew Bolding's mother after his father's death or land which was given by Seyena's family when she married and due to this would be maintained by the next generation through Andrew.<sup>43</sup>

The two gifts in these deeds do not state whether the land was passed to Seyena in her dower, but even if this was not the case, it was certainly preserved through the female line. It is not only land given before marriage as a dowry which was maintained. On the occasions when land was left to a widow by her husband, she was provided with a living after the death of her husband and also land which could be passed on to their children, especially if it was from a family estate.

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<sup>40</sup> LLGC/NLW, Pitchford Hall (Ottley) Papers, deed 1144.

<sup>41</sup> LLGC/NLW, Pitchford Hall (Ottley) Papers, deed 1352, land passed on through Seyena, the grantor's mother.

<sup>42</sup> LLGC/NLW, Pitchford Hall (Ottley) Papers, deed 1352, grant for a messuage on the High Street of Bridgnorth, a messuage and piece of land extending from the highway to the cemetery of St Leonard, a grange outside the north gate of Bridgnorth, a 'held' of land in a field of Bridgnorth lying near the way leading from Bridgnorth to Cantrey, five acres of land in the field of Brug, in the field towards le Hokefield, with an annual rent of 1 pence. Issuing from a piece of land near the orchard the grantor, Andrew Bolding received from his mother Seyena.

<sup>43</sup> LLGC/NLW, Pitchford Hall (Ottley) Papers, deed 1352, dated 1298.

Further examples from Bridgnorth which focus on one particular family and highlight the disposal of a widow's dower are illustrated by the land transactions of the Broune family. In 1300, Annis Broune, Nicholas Broune's widow, passed land on to her daughters.<sup>44</sup> Although the grant does not state that it is her dower or dowry land, the land transferred had formerly belonged to her father; in the relevant deed Annis was addressed as 'relict', suggesting that it had been returned to her in her widowhood and she was not acting as her husband's executrix.<sup>45</sup> This land would have been given to Annis prior to her marriage and it was clearly intended to remain in the family in a similar process as that described above in the case study of John Rondulph and his daughter, Alice, where the land appears to have been granted in fee tail and should return to the grantor should both spouses die without heirs.<sup>46</sup> Annis, widow of Nicholas Broune, was also described as 'relict' in 1302 when granting a mortgage of 8s. of two butts in a field near 'le Hoke field' which lay between land held by Richard the Dyer and the grantee's daughters, Isabel and Agnes, who both appeared to be unmarried.<sup>47</sup> This illustrates the involvement of Bridgnorth's middling sort. Nicholas Broune acted as a witness 12 times during the 1290-1300 decade and was a member of a number of networks with others who meet the middling sort criteria.<sup>48</sup> Nicholas Broune thus meets the criteria for the middling sort laid out in the introduction. Although evidence of land given as a dowry exists throughout the deeds, either from a husband granting the land or the wife, now a widow, granting it, these selected cases demonstrate how land could be kept in Bridgnorth's families.

### **Single and widowed women**

Of the 215 deeds involving women, ninety-two involve women granting land alone, independently of a male party. To show how women granted land independently of men and what this can tell us about the phases of women's life cycle, in the current section, we consider three of these ninety-two deeds in more detail. These three deeds state that the grantor was an unmarried daughter with no reference to a husband or to a state of widowhood, only noting her status through her nearest male

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<sup>44</sup> LLGC/NLW, Pitchford Hall (Ottley) Papers, deed 498.

<sup>45</sup> LLGC/NLW, Pitchford Hall (Ottley) Papers, deed 498.

<sup>46</sup> LLGC/NLW, Pitchford Hall (Ottley) Papers, deed 57, John Rondulph granting land to Edmund Pitchford and John's daughter Alice prior to their marriage.

<sup>47</sup> LLGC/NLW, Pitchford Hall (Ottley) Papers, deed 101.

<sup>48</sup> LLGC/NLW, Pitchford Hall (Ottley) Papers.

kinsman, her father. However, these relationships were not always the case and sometimes it is only through connecting separate deeds that the marital status of a woman can be determined. One such case, previously mentioned, relates to the activities of Agnes, the sister of Alice Rondulph, whose marriage to Edmund Pitchford has also previously been discussed. Alice's testamentary evidence describes her sister as an active party, naming Agnes as an executrix, but not mentioning her marital status. However, we know Agnes was unmarried, as in the first reference to her in the deeds, dated 1349, she was referred to by her maiden name 'Rondulph' when she was at her sister, Alice's, death in 1377, suggesting she never married.<sup>49</sup>

The number of women taking part in the property market can be a result of the increase of Bridgnorth's development through the middle decades of the fourteenth century where more property became available, as discussed above for men. The middling sort would have been denied such opportunities had the property development remained the same.

However, women had always played a role in the land market and not just in the boom period. A deed dated 1292, half a century before the steep increase in property transactions of the mid-fourteenth century, shows an agreement between Aline de Longebarue and William, son of William de Farnhales for rent to the Abbot of Lilleshall with specification for how the land in question should be used.<sup>50</sup> It was agreed that William would cultivate the land and Aline would provide half of the seed and reapers and receive half of the sheaves. Each would receive half of all rents owed and should William die before Aline, all land would revert to her.<sup>51</sup> Like many of the earlier deeds from this study, the agreement not only named the area and type of land in question, but also how it should be used and, more importantly, who would receive the revenue. Cultivation of this land by those responsible may not have been

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<sup>49</sup> LLGC/NLW, Pitchford Hall (Ottley) Papers, deed 322, dated 1377, Agnes Rondulph acting as her sister's executor.

<sup>50</sup> LLGC/NLW, Pitchford Hall (Ottley) Papers, deed 1090, land between fields at Erditon and the river Severn and a grange there, ten seilons lying above the river and eleven lying between lands of Aline and William (those agreeing), five seilons extending from the aforesaid grange of Aline and sixteen more leading to the Severn from the grange and a meadow in the same field with a rent of 16p.; 10p. from Richard Dapinas, 2p. from the heirs of Adam le Fon'ear, and 4p. from Alice, daughter of William de Farnhales.

<sup>51</sup> LLGC/NLW, Pitchford Hall (Ottley) Papers, deed 1090.

hugely expensive and Aline may have hoped to gain her money back, but she nevertheless had money enough to employ reapers. The deed also reveals the land she already possessed and that it should revert to her if William predeceased her.<sup>52</sup> It was not only the type and quantity of land that Aline held that is of interest here, but that she was managing her own property and the cultivation of her land.

In the following discussion, we focus on a notable group of women who appear in the deeds as holding and disposing of property. A case from the Broune family has already been noted and here we continue to see their actions and those of the Pannying family. We also include the actions of individuals' not identified with a particular family or larger group, such as those of Alice Cheote, who frequently took part in the property market. But first we should note another woman in this respect, Roger Page's widow, Matilda. Matilda was widowed early in 1340 and proceeded to grant land in Bridgnorth over a five- to six-year period following this, suggesting she acted as an executrix for her husband's will. However, this was not her only involvement in property, as we see her acquiring land in a grant from Edmund Pitchford for a tenement in Whitburn Street during the time she was an executrix of her husband's will.<sup>53</sup> Matilda's financial situation once widowed is unknown, but this grant and the above evidence would imply that she was fairly solvent. This was not always the case for widows, who could find their financial situation precarious. As a member of the middling sort, it was perhaps unlikely that Matilda would have lived in this tenement, as discussed above for Edmund Pitchford and John Canne, but if a widow was poor, her experience could have been very different and she could have found herself a tenant and not a landlady. Maryanne Kowaleski commented, in her study on the medieval consumer society, that low-end housing, often called "rents", was inexpensive and frequently attracted widows and single women who may not have been able to afford an independent living.<sup>54</sup> These rents would have been

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<sup>52</sup> LLGC/NLW, Pitchford Hall (Ottley) Papers, deed 1090.

<sup>53</sup> LLGC/NLW, Pitchford Hall (Ottley) Papers, deed, 24, Edmund granting a tenement to Matilda Page.

<sup>54</sup> Maryanne Kowaleski, 'A Consumer Economy', in W. M. Ormrod and Rosemary Horrox (eds.), *A Social History of England, 1200-1500* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), pp. 238-260; Christopher Dyer, 'The Consumer and the Market in the Later Middle Ages', *The Economic History Review*, New Series, 42, no. 3 (August 1989), pp. 305-327.

cramped and reflected the lack of wealth and status of their occupants.<sup>55</sup> This further demonstrates the tenurial ladder discussed above, where those who resided in the tenements were at the bottom of the social and tenurial ladder, leaving them unnamed in the deeds.

Urban rents could, however, be seen as useful to a dowager, such as Matilda, as they would require little management and simply a watchful eye. Richard Goddard noted in his study of Coventry that widows demonstrated a preference for a higher, longer-term annual income in rent over an initial higher down-payment.<sup>56</sup> Possibly because they traded less and their incomes did not originate from business or manufacture, widows may have preferred the regular flow of a capital in this manner.<sup>57</sup> Therefore, for widows who could invest in the urban property market through purchasing buy-to-rent-out, property could produce a stable income.<sup>58</sup> However, ultimately, how solvent a widow was following her husband's death depended on her dower and endowments made during their marriage. While we cannot follow the details of the above transactions any further due to the lack of surviving deeds, information that does remain illustrates the disposal of dower by Bridgnorth widows. Below, I discuss three case studies of widows who all operate independently in Bridgnorth's property market.

### **The Broune family**

The Broune family can be seen throughout the study period but the women we now focus on were active in the early decades of the study period. Annis Broune may have acted as an executrix for her husband, but in the years following her husband's death, her daughters, Agnes and Isabel, acted jointly when releasing an acre of land. This had not been specified as inheritance, nor were they in some way acting on behalf of their father's wishes.<sup>59</sup> The release fell within a few years of their mother's transactions, which suggests that this was also land acquired following their father's death, possibly bequeathed to them personally, but this is not stated. In 1316, Isabel Broune granted

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<sup>55</sup> Lilley, *Urban Life*, p. 142.

<sup>56</sup> Goddard, *Lordship and Medieval Urbanisation*, p. 196.

<sup>57</sup> Goddard, *Lordship and Medieval Urbanisation*, p. 196; Barron and Sutton, *Medieval London Widows*.

<sup>58</sup> Marjorie McIntosh, *Working Women in English Society, 1300-1620* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), p. 116.

<sup>59</sup> LLGC/NLW, Pitchford Hall (Ottley) Papers, deed 449.

a mortgage by way of lease for fifteen years to John the Goldsmith in the field near Hoke Field, which lay next to land that her sister, Agnes, held. In 1318, Isabel once again granted land in this field.<sup>60</sup> Isabel is the only member of the Broune women to be seen in the deeds, although her sister, Agnes, may have married and her mother may have re-married, which would have made them hard to trace due to the change of name. Isabel appears to have remained unmarried for a long time and was still called Broune in 1337.<sup>61</sup> This is not to suggest that she never married but for over twenty years she does not appear to have done so.

### **The Pannyng family**

In terms of middling sort women directly involved in land transfer, another notable group of women in Bridgnorth whose actions are similar to those of the Broune family are the Pannyng family. They also show similar trends in terms of direct engagement with land transfer through the actions of widows and daughters spanning the first half of the fourteenth century. In relation to the criteria for the middling sort as defined in this study, we see the brothers William and John Pannyng both frequently acting as witnesses in the deeds, 12 and 14 times respectively. As female relations of these men, it can be assumed with some certainty that these women were also middling.

The widows of John and William Pannyng appear to have acted as their husbands' executors. One deed detailing the actions of John's widow, Alice, the surviving deeds for William Pannyng's widow, Cristina, describe her as a widow and the transaction the deed records took place within a five- to six year period following William's death.<sup>62</sup> The first deed granted by all three of the Pannyng women, dated 1322, concerned a grant for a tenement in Whitburn Street, near Symon Dod's bake house. It was witnessed by John Croke and John Glydde.<sup>63</sup> The second grant from 1326 was to John Rondulph for a tenement in the high street and was witnessed by Nicholas Pitchford senior, John Croke and John Glydde.<sup>64</sup> The familial network of these men and their families is sustained in a grant by John Pannyng's widow, Alice, in

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<sup>60</sup> LLGC/NLW, Pitchford Hall (Ottley) Papers, deed 1283, Isabel Broune grants a mortgage to John Aurifaber; deed 604, Isabel once again grants land in Hoke Field.

<sup>61</sup> LLGC/NLW, Pitchford Hall (Ottley) Papers, deed 179.

<sup>62</sup> LLGC/NLW, Pitchford Hall (Ottley) Papers, deed 49; deed 511, Cristina Pannyng granting land; deed 9, Alice Pannyng granting land.

<sup>63</sup> LLGC/NLW, Pitchford Hall (Ottley) Papers, deed 49.

<sup>64</sup> LLGC/NLW, Pitchford Hall (Ottley) Papers, deed 511.



1324.<sup>65</sup> Here John Rondulph was once again the grantee of tenements in Bridgnorth for the life of the grantor and the tenement was held near those properties possessed by William de le Hulle and Richard and Simon Dod, in Whitburn Street. Once again, the witness list included Nicholas Pitchford, John Croke and John Glydde.<sup>66</sup> The regularity of these names would suggest a familiarity between these men and their networks, gained from a shared interest in these properties.<sup>67</sup>

These lands and tenements appeared to have stayed within the family. William Pannyng's daughter, Annis, was granted land by John Rondulph for a tenement in Whitburn Street, possibly as an exchange, near tenements already held by Roger Pryde and Roger Page and tenements relating to those granted by her mother, discussed above.<sup>68</sup> Later that same year, 1325, Annis released a tenement back to John Rondulph and one to her brother, John, who held it next to tenements of William de le Hulle, again in Whitburn Street, demonstrating the networks of these men through property interests.<sup>69</sup> The dates of these deeds would suggest this land came to Annis following her father's death, much like the land received by Isabel Broune.<sup>70</sup> Annis appears to have kept possession of tenements in Whitburn Street, as twenty years later, in 1345, a deed still refers to her holding these tenements.<sup>71</sup> In this deed, she granted a curtilage in Whitburn Street, again next to one held by Roger Page.<sup>72</sup> She was still identified as 'daughter of William Pannyng', suggesting she had not married.

We can see from further instances that it was not unusual for unmarried women in Bridgnorth to grant land, as in the case of Alditha and Matilda, daughters of Henry the tailor, who granted a messuage in Whitburn Street to Henry, son of Henry de Porta. Both women appear to have been unmarried with no suggestion that their

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<sup>65</sup> LLGC/NLW, Pitchford Hall (Ottley) Papers, deed 9. Community networks and social circles are discussed in Chapter 2.

<sup>66</sup> LLGC/NLW, Pitchford Hall (Ottley) Papers, deed 9. For William de la Hulle's will, see Chapter 3.

<sup>67</sup> See Chapter 2 for a discussion of the social networks of Bridgnorth's middling sort.

<sup>68</sup> LLGC/NLW, Pitchford Hall (Ottley) Papers, deed 14, dated 1325/6; deed 512, dated 1325/6; deed 12, dated 1345; deed 14.

<sup>69</sup> LLGC/NLW, Pitchford Hall (Ottley) Papers, deed 512.

<sup>70</sup> LLGC/NLW, Pitchford Hall (Ottley) Papers, deed 449.

<sup>71</sup> LLGC/NLW, Pitchford Hall (Ottley) Papers, deed 12.

<sup>72</sup> LLGC/NLW, Pitchford Hall (Ottley) Papers, deed 12.

father was deceased or that they were acting as his executors.<sup>73</sup> A similarly interesting example from beyond Bridgnorth, in Chester, saw an unmarried daughter lease land to her parents. Lucy, daughter of Robert and Agnes le Chamberleyn, leased a messuage of land situated next to land she already held for two lives to her parents.<sup>74</sup> The exact nature of this lease is unknown; the witness list included the mayor of Chester, a feature again suggestive of higher/status/middling involvement in the transfer.

### **Alice Cheote**

In one further relevant instance from Bridgnorth, in 1351, the unmarried daughter of Robert Cheote, appears in deeds which did not state that she was acting as an executrix, naming her as 'Alice, daughter of Robert Cheote, in her virginity'.<sup>75</sup> The document was a quitclaim from Alice of the right she held to a tenement in a curtilage which Agnes, formerly the wife of John Cheote, held in dower following John's death.<sup>76</sup> This record shows a widow disposing of her own property with no evidence to suggest Agnes was deceased and Alice was acting as her executrix and disposing of this property to that end. Instead, Agnes could be giving the land to Alice, as it was Agnes's right to once recovered in her dower, and Alice was now free to quitclaim land. John Cheote could be Alice's brother or uncle and Agnes could be her sister-in-law or aunt, but the deed does not state this. This transaction of property exchanged and held by women, first Agnes, John's widow, and subsequently passed to Alice who acted in law when quitclaiming it, demonstrates that women acted independently within the property market, seemingly with no assistance from men.

The transfers described in these deeds are the same types of transfers and relate to the same locations as those seen in transactions by men. The main difference in the deed is the gender of the grantor and recipient. What is to be taken from this foray into the property actions of women is that they acted in the same manner as men and held a similar social standing in Bridgnorth.

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<sup>73</sup> LLGC/NLW, Pitchford Hall (Ottley) Papers, deed 112.

<sup>74</sup> LLGC/NLW, Pitchford Hall (Ottley) Papers, deed 35, dated 1310.

<sup>75</sup> SA Mrs Dyas' Collection, deed 796/9, dated 1351. The phrase 'in her virginity' could imply that she had taken a vow as a vowess, choosing to take a religious vow but to live in the world rather than enter a convent, or that she was young and unmarried. It is most likely the latter.

<sup>76</sup> SA Mrs Dyas' Collection, deed 796/9.

## **Conclusion**

This chapter has demonstrated, the deeds reveal that property was not only an important resource for men but also for women, albeit in lesser numbers. Women of the middling sort could benefit from burgage tenure much like men. Burgesses held no obligations to local lords and therefore could divide their land as they wished; this meant that women could receive real estate and a married daughter could also inherit property from inheritance and an acquisition in her dowry. In the real estate market, it appears that in medieval English market towns, such as Bridgnorth, women were active players who managed their own property and tenements. Cases from Bridgnorth illustrate the apparent acceptability for middling sort women to take part in the property market, suggesting that outside of marriage, they could still hold enough independent wealth to operate within the local economy and thereby within the circles of the middling sort.

## **CONCLUSION**

This study has demonstrated who Bridgnorth's middling sort were and how that status became more clearly defined from the end of the thirteenth century to the end of the fourteenth century. It has identified not only the social roles but many of the social relations which were created through the middling sort networks. Each chapter has sought to build a stronger image of who these people were and how we can define them through their own self-imposed social organisation. The individual's socio-economic status and subsequently their identity within their town portrays a diverse society and within that society, the middling sort is a diverse social group. This period was witness to a transition phase, from the older landed gentry to the rising prosperity of the middling sort who could obtain social status through wealth rather than lineage. So, too, do we see the transition of their landscape and the impact they had on it through the urbanisation of market towns and the development of the trade networks which were operated and controlled by the middling sort.

This study has focused on the role of the middling sort's locality, gender, local government and property which are all prominent themes in their pre-existing historiography. The aim of this conclusion is to highlight, summarise and evaluate some of the features of this study. Historians have tended to focus on aristocratic groups or peasantry in the localities and overlooked the importance of those who were wealthy and depended largely on non-landed estates. Through focusing on the composition and operation of a particular local society, Bridgnorth, it has been possible to identify and place the figures between these ranks.

The Introduction laid out the criteria for how the middling sort can be identified and defined in this study in a local context, where trade brought the prosperous middling sort power and status. In identifying the criteria for Bridgnorth's middling sort, the importance of social networks became especially apparent and the information from the deeds has been utilised to determine the sense of status the middling sort felt and the need to maintain that status. The marriage patterns strengthened these ideals, as we have seen in instances of individuals actively seeking to marry within their group as a means of remaining in it.

The sense of one's status and position is also evident from material discussed in the second chapter, where we have examined the visual means of the middling sort's self-identification. The use of sigillography allows us to identify and interpret the middling sort's seal designs in terms of their social status. It is also through a study of seals that the theme of lineage and heritage can be explored. Here individuals without gentry heritage sought to create their own coat of arms as they felt befitted their wealth and status in the locality. This highlights a characteristic of the middling sort, which has become a prominent theme through reading the deeds, namely their imitation and emulation of the gentry.

The middling sort's imitation of gentry practices is especially seen in their testamentary evidence, as revealed in Chapter 3, as was their sense of place and their awareness of their environment, since they left provisions for the maintenance of the town. The public image of the middling sort was a preoccupation of theirs and the provisions for their funerals and memorial requests are a form of visual heritage in a similar vein as the visual displays of status seen on their seals. In the middling sort's bequests beyond the nuclear family, the testamentary evidence demonstrates their broader social world. The wider an individual's social world, the more evidence they left of it as seen in the many religious houses that received bequests from William de la Hulle, which can be interpreted as publicly signifying reputation. This added a further layer of significance to the private and public activities of social and political relations in the locality. The visual memorial from one's funeral and masses brought a private matter into the public recognition of wealth and status. It emphasised the public relations of the testator and their responsibility and status as a conscientious citizen. It is in this chapter that we saw the imitation of gentry practices through the requests of location for burial within the church, suggesting the testators' awareness of social structure and where they believed they belonged in it, even if the request was to be placed in areas often reserved for the gentry. Chapter 3 also highlighted that bequests were more than just a way of transmitting wealth and the choice of executors, those who received specific gifts, and the order in which they were dispersed through one's network, enhanced the image of the individual's social standing.

The wealth of the middling sort meant that they could emulate the gentry and this is also clear through their property acquisitions, forming an “urban estate”. This study has furthered the already mapped out evidence of Bridgnorth’s urbanisation by historians such as Keith Lilley and Jane Croom. Where the mapping of Bridgnorth by these historians stopped, I have continued it through the deeds, utilised here, and charted the newly forming areas not previously mapped. By doing so, I have demonstrated how the middling sort monopolised the new developments of the middle decades of the fourteenth century and left a lasting legacy. An example of this is Cann Hall, which still stands just off Mill Street where John Canne focused his property. This chapter also presented evidence of newly forming streets and suburbs which opened up fresh avenues for trade in property by the middling sort and brought opportunities for both men and women. Within local studies, there is a need to conceptualise not only the social aspects of the middling sort but also the spatial aspects, which can be seen to constitute their social relationships. The reason for this on the middling sort’s status is explored through the development of the property market. This demonstrated how their property actions identified them and their status within the middling sort.

While some historians have treated men and women separately, here I have viewed the evidence for both and demonstrated that women of the middling sort behaved in the same manner as men. Women in Bridgnorth are seen to feel as strongly about their status and position as men and actively sought to maintain it. They are seen to do this through the means available to them, often marriage, if inheritance was not forthcoming. Women were disadvantaged in the marketplace and found it harder to create their own wealth in business and trade as the wealthier middling sort merchants. This study has therefore implicitly made a point of treating men and women with equal consideration within the remit of the source material.

This study has shown a link between social status, office holding and wealth, which had been obtained through trade or property. The accumulation of these and their effect on a person’s social standing was closely related, but not necessarily dependent upon them. The accumulation of these areas integrates the many areas of society which affected the individuals’ status. Although this is more complex than the

scope of this study, it has attempted to establish a criterion for placing these individuals at a local level.

This study does have some limitations. It is limited by its concentration on a single locality. A fuller understanding of the identity of the people and the town of Bridgnorth through their own actions in comparison to others in a regional context would be beneficial. This is hampered by the lack of a common agenda within studies focusing on a region with those which focus on a wider region. This presents the problem of connecting research of the social and physical place of the middling sort within different localities. This issue is hampered further with the additional problem of the differing source material used for each study.

The unique nature of Bridgnorth and its geographical position on trade routes as well as its rich wool trade has, however, afforded us a rich study of the lived experience of this group. In spite of limitations to this study, the self-determination of the middling sort, as individuals and as a collective, is clearly recognised, as are the ways in which they developed a collective and single social identity for themselves. Afforded their status by birth, the gentry did not seek to project their status as obviously as did the middling sort in the fourteenth century. The latter used examples of status supplied by the gentry as a means to reach what they saw as similar social recognition. In this way, they created their place in their society.





## **Appendix 2: Wool trade and staple**

The *Estate of Merchants* grew from Edward III's expenditure during the early years of the war with France. The Estate was a group of wealthy merchants, such as Nicholas Pitchford who is discussed in chapter 1 and 2, who were organised by the king and acted as his financiers and in return he gave them a monopoly on trade networks. This brought wool merchants into view for the first time as a serious source of income for the crown.<sup>3</sup> The king used the taxation on trade for his own gains, economically and politically. Edward did not only tax the wool, but also took a share of the profits, which led to a domination of those merchants who could finance the crown through loans and advances.<sup>4</sup> Due to the extent of Nicholas Pitchford's trade networks, wealth and associates with London trading port which are discussed in Chapters 1 and 2, it is believed he acted as one of the king's financiers. This is further established as he was named as one of the merchants who were called upon to take collection of wool from lesser merchants in the Shropshire area.

The managers of this initial plan for the Estate of Merchants, following the county collection in 1337-8, were William de La Pole of Hull and Reginald de Conduit of London. These men were charged with disposing of the wool collected from across England and placed in charge of the king's shares, they each offered large sums as evidenced by Reginald's grant of £949 16s. 42d.<sup>5</sup> This was the beginning of a monopoly of ninety-nine merchants in a syndicate which eventually extended to 200 members, some only acting as a supplier, aiming to reach the 30,000 sacks the syndicate had previously agreed with the king.<sup>6</sup>

The Bridgnorth merchant Nicholas Pitchford is known to have been a wealthy wool merchant and the seizure of his wool, see appendix 5, in Bruges had taken place five years prior to the county collections. This suggests Nicholas was in a prominent position amongst the merchants, holding wealth enough to be in the syndicate. The seizure could be seen as making an example of Nicholas to the other wealthy merchants in the syndicate who controlled the trade of wool. It could also illustrate

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<sup>3</sup> Hatcher and Miller, *Medieval England: Towns, Commerce and Crafts*, p. 238.

<sup>4</sup> Hatcher and Miller, *Medieval England: Towns, Commerce and Crafts*, p. 238.

<sup>5</sup> Hatcher and Miller, *Medieval England: Towns, Commerce and Crafts*, p. 23; CPR, VIII, p. 83.

<sup>6</sup> Hatcher and Miller, *Medieval England: Towns, Commerce and Crafts*, p. 238; Eileen Power, *The Wool Trade*, p. 115.

the dissatisfaction felt by merchant producers who could not afford to be a member of the syndicate and whose prices were brought down due to the disruption to their market by the wealthy merchants. After all, these merchants were close to the king, who determined the terms under which merchants could trade.<sup>7</sup>

The king ventured that wool should be collected and lent to the king without ready payment and sold on the continent in his name, which would be acceptable only to wealthy merchants. However, the merchants who did not possess this wealth and were located in county markets would find themselves worse off by not participating in the collection of wool and may well have found their wool taken nevertheless. If they were to conceal their wool and not declare it, they would still be unable to export it as the king banned the sale of wool until he had collected the agreed 30,000 sacks.<sup>8</sup> Following the initial syndicate, established when the collection of wool was agreed in 1337, the merchants of England appear to have become clearly divided in 1340-1341 between the small group of roughly forty merchants who handled the taxes and loans for the king and the others who did not.<sup>9</sup> The reward for the richer merchants' service was freedom to export wool on their own account even in times when shipments other than the king's were prohibited.<sup>10</sup>

In 1342, the king appears to have attempted to acquire more funds from wool with the compulsory staple by preventing illegal overseas trade, which would result in a loss of income for him. This led to the establishment of compulsory staple ports, where merchants were obligated to bring their wool. An election of a nominal head or Mayor of the Staple, selected by the leading merchants, was intended to maintain wool prices and the rate of its exchange.<sup>11</sup> The officials of a Staple oversaw all the unloading in order to prevent smuggling and those merchants in the Staple Company would take a third of all forfeitures.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Hatcher and Miller, *Medieval England: Towns, Commerce and Crafts*, p. 238.

<sup>8</sup> D. Hughes, *A Study of Social and Constitutional Tendencies in the Early Years of Edward III* (London: Kessinger Press, 1915), p. 35.

<sup>9</sup> CCR, V, pp. 171-2; Hatcher and Miller, *Medieval England: Towns, Commerce and Crafts*, p. 247.

<sup>10</sup> CCR, V, pp. 171-2; Hatcher and Miller, *Medieval England: Towns, Commerce and Crafts*, p. 247.

<sup>11</sup> Lloyd, *English Wool Trade*, p. 194; G. Sayles, "The English Company" of 1343 and a Merchants Oath', *Speculum*, 6 (1931), p. 184.

<sup>12</sup> Lloyd, *English Wool Trade*, p. 194;

### **Appendix 3: Edward III's wool collection**

In order to tax the local wool merchants, Edward III ordered a collection of wool from across the country and to be conducted by wealthy merchants from the *Estate of Merchants*. The men chosen from Bridgnorth are all noted as meeting criteria of its middling sort as seen in chapter 1 and 2. Over the course of three assemblies which Edward III conducted with merchants throughout June and July of 1337, the king and his merchants agreed upon the sum of 30,000 sacks of wool to be raised and taken by royal purveyance.<sup>13</sup> The collection was to start at county level and the total amount of wool was divided for collection from across the counties. Between two and seven merchants from each county were responsible for collecting their portion. These men were to pay a figure set by the king the previous year for the best wool and bargain with the owners of wool of lesser quality.<sup>14</sup> The collectors did not hand over payment immediately, but half the agreed sum would be forwarded within six months and the other half within the six months following the wool's delivery. This payment method left many smaller merchant traders "out of pocket". The wool merchants received a personal bond from the merchant collectors and not a compulsory royal letter which would act as a surety of payment. This meant the king used credit from leading merchants to gather wool for himself. The repayment to the collectors came from the funds of those who entered into the king's venture, which squeezed out those who could not afford it.<sup>15</sup> Ultimately, this led to a monopolising of the wool trade by wealthy merchants.

### **Appendix 4: Case study: Wool collection from Adam de Hopton in Bridgnorth**

Examining this collection at the local level and here, specifically, Bridgnorth we see how powerful the wealthy middling sort merchants could be and how they controlled the flow of wool and wealth within their own networks as discussed in chapter 1. An account in the Close Rolls could be the first notification of wool collection taking place in Bridgnorth and Nicholas Pitchford's role in this venture. A writ from the King to the

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<sup>13</sup> Lloyd, *English Wool Trade* p. 146; E. B. Fryde, *The Wool Accounts of William de la Pole* (York: St Anthony Publishing, 1964), pp. 21-24.

<sup>14</sup> Lloyd, *English Wool Trade*, p. 149.

<sup>15</sup> Lloyd, *English Wool Trade*, p. 149.

sheriff of Shropshire and Staffordshire announced that Adam had lately been appointed by the King to control the wool granted for the king's use. Following this, there is a record from the Treasurer and Barons of the Exchequer concerning a payment made to Adam de Hopton, the king's clerk, to the sum of 19 marks, 6s., 8d.<sup>16</sup> What follows is the trading chain which handled this wool from county level onwards to the crown. In this case, the wool from the counties of Shropshire and Staffordshire was received by the Sheriff, Nicholas de Pitchford, William le Skynner, Roger Pride and Thomas le Goldsmyth, cited here as 'receivers' and all meet the criteria of Bridgnorth middling sort as discussed in chapters 1 and 2.<sup>17</sup> These men collected wool for the whole county by royal appointment, as stated further below.<sup>18</sup> These men were known members of the Wool Staple Company, the very creation of which suggests that the marketing of wool had now become a specialised function to some members of Bridgnorth's merchant community.<sup>19</sup> The sheriff was ordered to pay Adam the expenses of 19 marks 6s., 8d for weighing, packing and carrying the wool in addition to his wages of 2s. a day. This evidence alone offers a brief view of payment charges and who held responsibility for them through the trading process at county level.

The issue of Adam de Hopton's pay is referenced further in the records on July 12<sup>th</sup>, 1339, when the Treasurer and Barons of the Exchequer ordered 8 marks 16d. to the sheriff of Shropshire and Staffordshire if they found he had previously paid that sum to Adam de Hopton.<sup>20</sup> This amount was for expenses Adam incurred when packing, weighing and sending the wool overseas. The King had ordered the sheriff to pay Adam an additional 2s. a day for 54 days' work and any wages in arrears to him. The same order was given on November 1<sup>st</sup>, 1339 to the sheriff of Shropshire and Staffordshire, ordering him to pay Adam de Hopton for his wool collection in those counties when working for the wool receivers. These expenses also covered sending the wool abroad, in addition to Adam's 54 days' work when he was attendant on the

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<sup>16</sup> CCR, V, p. 96.

<sup>17</sup> CCR, V, p. 96.

<sup>18</sup> CCR, V, p. 301 states that the receivers of wool in the county of Shropshire and Staffordshire were given this role by royal appointment.

<sup>19</sup> Goddard, *Lordship and Medieval Urbanisation*, p. 228.

<sup>20</sup> CCR, V, p. 164.

premises, the exact locations of which are unclear.<sup>21</sup> The latter two records highlight the number of days Adam occupied the premises, however, whether his attendance was continuous or sporadic is unclear.

What this evidence does suggest is the time taken to weigh and pack the wool, which could indicate the quantity Adam received or that 54 days were the standard and set period for the collection for the king. The last reference to Adam's payment came later that same week on November 6<sup>th</sup>, 1339, when the Treasurer and the Barons of the Exchequer were ordered to allow 8 marks 16d. to the sheriff of Shropshire and Staffordshire if they found he had previously paid the sum to Adam de Hopton, by virtue of the above order.<sup>22</sup>

Together, these records provide a snapshot of the Bridgnorth procedure for the business and process of wool collection during this period and the agents employed to transport it. They also illustrate the wages that Adam expected to receive for the days he worked and provide a brief description of what his job entailed. What becomes clear from such evidence is that Nicholas had royal endorsement to receive and trade in wool and it would also seem he was a member of the society of merchants of the realm.<sup>23</sup> The trade of merchants from localities such as Bridgnorth brought profits into their localities' internal trade, which was a prime source for the town's economic and urban expansion.<sup>24</sup> A significant development in the recognition of a merchant's wealth occurred when provincial merchants were granted licences to export wool overseas.

## **Appendix 5: Seizure of Nicholas Pitchford's wool**

Nicholas Pitchford was a wealthy wool trader as seen through the use of his illuminated manuscript and the amount of debt still owed to him at the time of his death, see Chapter 1, Nicholas was not only a member of the middling sort and

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<sup>21</sup> CCR, V, p. 301.

<sup>22</sup> CCR, V, p. 301.

<sup>23</sup> See below.

<sup>24</sup> Lloyd, *English Wool Trade*, p. 53.

prominent town figure but due to his wealth and closeness to the king as a financier could all have been the reason his wool was seized at an illegal staple in Bruges in 1331-2.<sup>25</sup> Nicholas could have been chosen as an example from the lesser merchants who were being squeezed out by the dominating monopoly of the king's financiers. The seizure was carried out by forty-two merchants and in May 1332, a mandate followed, demanding they release the wool.<sup>26</sup> The merchants ignored this order and sheriffs in England were ordered to distrain their goods in England.<sup>27</sup> The king's order stated that the merchants should release the wool they had seized by quinzaine of midsummer together with damages and no hindrance and to allow merchants to transport their goods in the realm.<sup>28</sup> It was also stated that if the merchants holding the staple failed in this, their wool and other goods in the realm were to be seized to the value of Nicholas's wool and the damages incurred to his satisfaction.<sup>29</sup>

The merchants ignored this, resulting in another writ on September 22<sup>nd</sup>, 1332, demanding the sheriffs of London arrest the merchants and keep their wool and other goods.<sup>30</sup> The merchants continued to ignore the order, resulting in another order on November 26<sup>th</sup>, 1332, for the sheriffs of London, Norfolk, Southampton and York to seize the wool and other goods of the merchants, because they had failed to return Nicholas's wool on order of the King.<sup>31</sup> The order from the King to the merchants holding the illegal staple was the result of a direct request from Nicholas Pitchford himself in 1331.<sup>32</sup> Here Nicholas was described as a merchant of Bridgnorth when petitioning the king over the wool he took overseas which was subsequently seized in Bruges.<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> TNA Website, *Discovery*: 1331/2, SC 8/194/9668.

<sup>26</sup> TNA Website, *Discovery*: 1331/2, SC 8/194/9668.

<sup>27</sup> Lloyd, *English Wool Trade*, p. 121.

<sup>28</sup> Quinzane was the fifteen days, or modern fortnight, after a Holy feast, Holy day or festival. Definition taken from Christopher Coredon and Ann Williams, *A Dictionary of Medieval Terms and Phrases* (Cambridge, 2005), p. 232.

<sup>29</sup> CCR, II, p. 437.

<sup>30</sup> CCR, II, p. 498.

<sup>31</sup> CCR, II, p. 519.

<sup>32</sup> TNA Website, *Discovery*: SC 8/194/9668.

<sup>33</sup> TNA Website, *Discovery*: SC 8/194/9668.

Based on petitions to the king and council, it would appear that Nicholas was not entirely without guilt in this instance.<sup>34</sup> The seizure of his wool in Bruges took place in 1328, with the orders to the merchants holding the illegal staple issued over the following years. However, Nicholas appears to have taken action himself, as indicated by a petition by Robert Enkepenne, merchant, addressed the king in 1330. This petition stated that while travelling to Brabant, his merchandise and that of other merchants was seized by Nicholas Pitchford and John and Robert de Abyndone among others, who then imprisoned him until he paid a fine for his release and return of his goods.<sup>35</sup> The petition also claims that Robert Enkepenne was scared to trade in these locations as he believed they still waited for him. His reason for his direct approach to the king was his knowledge that Nicholas Pitchford and those involved were English and the king's lieges.<sup>36</sup> This document could be seen as an act of retaliation on Nicholas's part or an elaboration of events on the part of the accuser. Unlike the seizure of Nicholas's wool, there is no further evidence of this case, the outcome of it or the kings' actions against the accused.

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<sup>34</sup> Lloyd, *English Wool Trade*, p. 149.

<sup>35</sup> TNA Website, *Discovery*: SC 8/289/14411. It is to be noted that this document has been dated based on the language and the hand.

<sup>36</sup> TNA Website, *Discovery*: SC 8/289/14411.

## Appendix 6: Mulnerstreet (Mill Street)

1361: Quitclaimed to John Canne by Joan, widow of Robert Bergham of her right.										
						1356: John Canne received a tenement from William de Overton, between two John already held.				
1355: Tenement already held by John Canne.	1355: Tenement already held by John Canne.	1355: Confirmed to John Canne by Thomas le Skynnar.	1355: Tenement held by William de Assham							
										1353: Through an attorney, Agnes, widow of William le Palmer, gave John Canne tenement.
				1531: Alice Cheote quitclaimed her right in part of tenement			1351: Tenement already held by John Canne.	1351: Quitclaim to John Canne by Thomas Rede, between tenements John already held.	1351: Tenement already held by John Canne:	
				1340: Held by Robert Cheote (father of Alice, above)	1340: Tenement already held by John Canne.					
		1349: Thomas Rede grants to John Canne.	1349: Held by Edith of Claverley							
				1298: Walter Canne held tenement.						

Table 9 Chronological overview of the tenements in Mill Street using the available record



The records also state that the tenements lead to the highway and land already in possession of John Canne, such as an orchard in 1361 and lands he held of the chief lord in 1355 and 1356. In 1353, Agnes, widow of William lePalmer, states that this tenement was also near a spring.

## **Appendix 7: Rondulph family land**

Throughout the study the Rondulph family have appeared frequently. Alice Rondulph's decision to re-marry following her first husband's death and her seals were discussed in chapters 1 and 2. Her lasting testamentary evidence was also studied in chapter 3. Her father, John's seal was also used as a case study in chapter 2. They are the main players from the family in the deeds but we have two references to Alice's sister, Agnes, and it would appear that there were no other siblings. When discussing the seals of Alice and John in chapter 2 it is noted that they bear, what appears to be, correct armorial arms but the corrosion of the seals makes this difficult to determine. In the following appendix we look at the lineage of this family from the first surviving deed in the collection which mentions the family. It is John's father, Nicholas, who is the first Rondulph to appear and it would seem that the land in this deed goes on to be inherited by his granddaughter, Alice, when she marries into the Pitchford family. The Rondulph family of Bridgnorth can be examined through an investigation of the appearance of Nicholas Rondulph, Alice's grandfather, in witness lists in the later thirteenth century, with the earliest dated 1277.<sup>1</sup> As Nicholas only appeared in the witness lists of deeds dated before 1312, it cannot be claimed with certainty that this was the same Nicholas Rondulph who received the land which was to remain in the family. What this could suggest however, is that the Nicholas who appeared in the early witness lists may have been John Rondulph's grandfather, who named his son after himself.

The land which was to remain Rondulph was located in Astley Abbots and was not granted to Alice and Edmund in total, as John Rondulph still held a portion and continued to do so through the fourteenth century in deeds dated after Alice

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<sup>1</sup> LLGC/NLW, Pitchford Hall (Ottley) Papers, deeds 41, 8, and 1315, early deeds witnessed by Nicholas Rondulph, earliest dating back to 1277.

Rondulph's marriage. A deed dated 1312 shows Lucy de Erboricis, widow of William, the lord of Tasely, releasing to Nicholas Rondulph, John Rondulph's father and Alice's grandfather, a messuage and lands in Tasely which Fremund de Erdinton had recently granted to Nicholas.<sup>2</sup> In the fourteenth century, John Rondulph continued to maintain land in Astely Abbots for himself and in 1349 and 1350, the deeds indicate he sold land and crops there.<sup>3</sup> These are the last surviving references in the deeds to the land and to the Rondulphs. However, tracing them back to the earliest deed demonstrates how the land was part of the Rondulph lineage and was first noted as being connected to them. This evidence not only demonstrates a brief timeframe for this family's connection to this land but also the importance of inherited land and in addition, the many tenements and plots and subsequent wealth Alice brought into the Pitchford family through her marriage. This land in Tasely and the date which Nicholas Rondulph came by it, along with its location outside of the immediate township, emphasise the Rondulphs' status as an older, landed family in Bridgnorth, especially as early deeds show gentry over the middling sort, highlighting the importance of this land as that which had long been held by the family and their lineage.<sup>4</sup> What is apparent is that the Rondulph family were already placed within the social structure of Bridgnorth and held authority prior to the rise of the middling sort.

## **Appendix 8: Bridgnorth as a Royal Chapel**

The following appendix looks at Bridgnorth's foundations as a Royal Peculiar and what that might have meant to the town's inhabitants and its character. It can also bear influence on the development of the town as studied in chapter 4. It is important to note, when discussing Bridgnorth's religious institutes, that Bridgnorth was a Royal Peculiar (also known as a royal secular college or royal free chapel). The significance of that status offered the possibility of royal supremacy and independence from Rome in an age when control and discipline of church matters normally fell under episcopal or

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<sup>2</sup> LLGC/NLW, Pitchford Hall (Ottley) Papers, deed, 443, Nicholas Rondulph granted lands in Tasely. Later, deed 1317, Lucy the widow of William, lord of Tasely grants a fee farm to John Odlebury and his wife Gilliana. These two deeds take place with five years of each other which suggests that as Lucy is still called a widow this may be her acting as an executor for her husband.

<sup>3</sup> LLGC/NLW, Pitchford Hall (Ottley) Papers, deed 1126 and 251.

<sup>4</sup> LLGC/NLW, Pitchford Hall (Ottley) Papers, deed 443. This deed is the first surviving reference to the Rondulph family and the land in Tasely, but a previous grant is referred to which states Nicholas Rondulph received land there. The land was granted to Nicholas by Fremund de Erdintone, but this earlier deed has not survived.

papal authority.<sup>5</sup> Bridgnorth was referred to in a clerical petition of 1295 which enquired about the king's chapels, naming at least fourteen, with Bridgnorth among them.<sup>6</sup> J. H. Denton explores the nature of royal chapels to discover a survival of spiritual liberties in some of the royal churches, which continued through the centuries of papal reform and could have played out in the locality of Bridgnorth.<sup>7</sup> Denton notes that royal chapels were for the most part not very large or wealthy, but they did provide livings for some influential civil servants. In Bridgnorth, as in other royal chapels, the king, rather than the Dean, collated the prebends, areas or 'parish', who individually and independently exercised full spiritual and temporal authority within their prebend.<sup>8</sup> However, this was not always adhered to, as in 1399 a petition was made by the parishioners to the Lord Chancellor of England, stating that their ancient church stood destitute without a priest or any divine services and they requested him to address this state of affairs.<sup>9</sup>

The royal chapels first appeared in fortified castles, such as Bridgnorth, and were purposefully located on the Marches as part of a fortified town. However, royal chapels lost many of their privileges over time and their importance ebbed in the centuries following the Norman Conquest, as occurred at Dover and Stafford. The chapel of St Mary Magdelene in Bridgnorth did, however, remain a full castle chapel as well as a royal chapel.<sup>10</sup> Where a castle-church was also a secular college, as in Bridgnorth, it would also maintain a private chapel. The college at Bridgnorth retained its collegiate status and remained the centre of an extensive deanery.<sup>11</sup> The land the parish held from its extensive deanery was only one area of wealth for the church in the localities, areas studied by historians such as R. N. Swanson and Clive Burgess.

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<sup>5</sup> J. H. Denton, *English Royal Free Chapels, 1100-1300: A Constitutional Study* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1970).

<sup>6</sup> Denton, *English Royal Free Chapels*, p. 1.

<sup>7</sup> Denton, *English Royal Free Chapels*.

<sup>8</sup> Denton, *English Royal Free Chapels*, p. 24; SA, Mrs Dyas' collection, 6000/171.

<sup>9</sup> LLGC/NLW, Pitchford Hall (Ottley) Papers, deed 1339.

<sup>10</sup> Denton, *English Royal Free Chapels*, p. 119.

<sup>11</sup> H. M. Colvin (ed.), *The History of the King's Works* (London: Her Majesty Stationary Office, 1963), pp. 771-2.

Burgess examined the English college to demonstrate its important function in embracing patrons and parishioners for the benefit of its society.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Clive Burgess and Martin Heale (eds.), *The Late Medieval English College and its Context* (York: York Medieval Press, 2008); Swanson, *Church and Society*.

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